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A DUSK OF IDOLS

By James Blish



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AMAZING STORIES, Fact and Science Fiction, Vol. 35, No. 3. March, 1961, is published monthly by Ziff Davis Publishing Company, William B. Ziff, Chairman of the Board (1946-1953) at 434 South Wabash Ave., Chicago 5, Ill. Second-class postage paid at Chicago, Ill., and at additional mailing offices. Subscription rates: U. S. and possessions and Canada \$3.50 for 12 issues; Pan American Union Countries \$4.00; all other foreign countries \$4.50.

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Cover: Leo Summers

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ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING Co.,
One Park Avenue, New
York 16, New York. William
Ziff, President; W. Bradford
Briggs, Executive Vice Pres-
ident; Michael Michaelson,
Vice President and Circula-
tion Director; H. B. Sarbin,
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EDITORIAL

KEEN-EYED readers of the Table of Contents may have already noted that the "Coming Next Month" department is not listed in this issue. The reason is that what is coming next month is so important that we decided to take this editorial space to tell you about it.

In April, 1926, Hugo Gernsback fathered the first issue of **AMAZING STORIES**. Despite wars, depressions, changes of ownership, and writers' missing deadlines, **AMAZING** has not missed an issue since then. Thus next month the magazine celebrates its 35th birthday.

To enable our loyal readers to celebrate with us, we decided to print an anniversary issue that no science-fiction fan in his right mind can possibly afford to miss. In its jam-packed, special-bonus 196 pages will be a collection of the greatest of classics ever to appear in **AMAZING's** 35-year history. All the stories will appear complete with their original illustrations. In addition to sheer

reading pleasure, it is instructive to see how sf themes and techniques have changed since the days of the old giants. Perhaps you, like us, will choose to ponder over whether the changes have been for good or ill.

To whet your appetite—if, indeed, it still requires whetting—here are some of the magnificent tales and magnificent writers the April **AMAZING** will offer you:

The incomparable Edgar Rice Burroughs with *John Carter and the Giant of Mars*; the first novel in which Buck Rogers ever appeared, *Armageddon—2419*, by Philip Francis Nowlan; the famed *Out of the Sub-Universe*, by R. F. Starzl; *The Flying Fool*, by Dr. David H. Keller, one of the all-time greats in the field; *Devolution*, by the masterful Edmond Hamilton; the first sf story ever written by Ray Bradbury to be featured on a cover, *I, Rocket*; and the never-to-be-forgotten *I, Robot*, by Eando Binder.

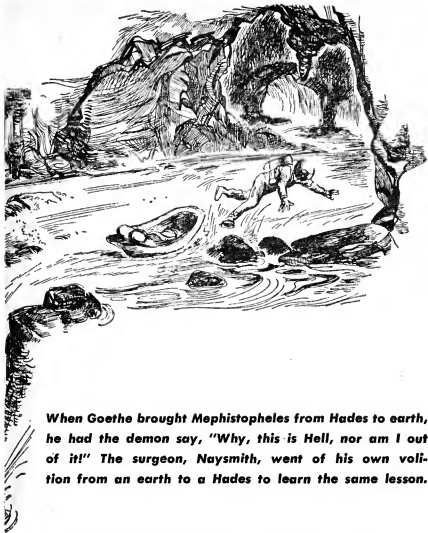
(Continued on page 94)

a DUSK of IDOLS

By JAMES BLISH

Illustrated by SUMMERS





When Goethe brought Mephistopheles from Hades to earth, he had the demon say, "Why, this is Hell, nor am I out of it!" The surgeon, Naysmith, went of his own volition from an earth to a Hades to learn the same lesson.

I CAN TELL you now what happened to Naysmith. He hit Chandala.

Quite by coincidence—he was on his way home at the time—

but it caught him. It was in all respects a most peculiar accident. The chances were against it, including that I should have heard anything about it.

Almost everyone in Arm II knows that Chandala is, pre-eminently among civilized planets, a world in mortal agony—and a world about which, essentially, nothing can be done. Naysmith didn't know it. He had had no experience of Arm II and was returning along it from his first contact with the Heart stars when his ship (and mine) touched Chandala briefly. He was on his way back to Earth (which technically is an Arm II planet, but so far out in the hinterlands that no Earthman ever thinks of it as such) when this happened, and since it happened during ship's night, he would never have known the difference if it hadn't been for an attack of simple indigestion which awakened him—and me.

It's very hard to explain the loss of so eminent a surgeon as Naysmith without maligning his character, but as his only confidant, more or less, I don't seem to have much of a choice. The fact is that he should have been the last person in the Galaxy to care about Chandala's agony. He had used his gifts to become exclusively a rich man's surgeon; as far as I know he had never done any time in a clinic after his residency days. He had gone to the Heart stars only to sterilize, for a very large fortune in fees, the sibling of the Bbiben of Bbenaf—for the fees, and for

the additional fortune the honor would bring him later. Bbenaf law requires that the operation be performed by an off-worlder, but Naysmith was the first Earthman to be invited to do it.

But if during the trip there or back some fellow passenger had come down with a simple appendicitis, Naysmith wouldn't have touched him. He would have said, with remote impartiality, that that was the job of the ship's surgeon (me). If for some reason I had been too late to help, Naysmith still would not have lifted a finger.

There are not supposed to be any doctors like that, but there are. Nobody should assume that I think they are in the majority—they are in fact very rare—but I see no point in pretending that they don't exist. They do; and the eminent Naysmith was one of them. He was in fact almost the Platonic ideal of such a doctor. And you do not have to be in the Heart stars to begin to think of the Hippocratic Oath as being quaint, ancient and remote. You can become isolated from it just as easily on Earth, by the interposition of unclimbable mountains of money, if you share Naysmith's temperament.

His temperament, to put it very simply, was that of a pathologically depressed man carrying a terrible load of anxiety.

In him, it showed up by making him a hypochondriac, and I don't think he would ever have gone into medicine at all had it not been for an urgent concern about his own health which set in while he was still in college. I had known him slightly then, and was repelled by him. He was always thinking about his own inwards. Nothing pleased him, nothing took him out of himself, he had no eye for any of the elegance and the beauty of the universe outside his own skin. Though he was as brilliant a man as I ever knew, he was a bore, the kind of bore who replies to "How are you?" by telling you how he is, in clinical detail. He was forever certain that his liver or his stomach or some other major organ had just quit on him and was going to have to be removed—probably too suddenly for help to be summoned in time.

It seems inarguable to me, though I am not a psychologist, that he took up medicine primarily in the hope (unrecognized in his own mind) of being able to assess his own troubles better, and treat them himself when he couldn't get another doctor to take them as seriously as he did. Of course this did not work. It is an old proverb in medicine that the man who treats himself has a fool for a physician, which is only a crude way

of saying that the doctor-patient relationship absolutely requires that there be two people involved. A man can no more be his own doctor than he can be his own wife, no matter how much he knows about marriage or medicine.

The result was that even after becoming the kind of surgeon who gets called across 50,000 light-years to operate on the sibling of the Bbiben of Bbenaf, he was still a hypochondriac. In fact he was worse off than ever, because he now had the most elaborate and sophisticated knowledge of all the obscure things that might be wrong with him. He had a lifelong case of interne's syndrome, the cast of mind which makes beginners in medicine sure that they are suffering from everything they have just read about in the textbook. He knew this; he was, as I have said, a brilliant man; though he had reached his ostensible goal, he was now in a position where he did not *dare* to treat himself, even for the hiccups.

And this was why he called me at midnight, ship's time, to look him over. There was nothing curable the matter with him. He had eaten something on Bbenaf—though he was a big, burly, bearded man, immoderate eating had made him unpleasantly soft—that was having trouble accommodating itself to his Terres-

trial protein complement. I judged that tomorrow he would have a slight rash, and thereafter the episode would be over. I told him so.

"Um. Yes. Daresay you're right. Still rather a shock, though, to be brought bolt upright like that in the middle of the night."

"Of course. However I'm sure it's nothing more than a slight food allergy—the commonest of all tourist complaints," I added, a little maliciously. "The tablets are anti-histaminic, of course. They ought to head off any serious sequelae, and make you a little sleepy to boot. You could use the relaxation, I think."

He nodded absently, without taking any apparent notice of my mean little dig. He did not recognize me, I'm quite sure. It had been a long time since college.

"Where are we?" he said. He was wide awake, though his alarm reaction seemed to be wearing off, and he didn't seem to want to take my hint that he use the pills as sleepy drugs; he wanted company, at least for a little while. Well, I was curious, too. He was an eminent man in my own profession, and I had an advantage over him: I knew more about him than he thought I did. If he wanted to talk, I was delighted to let him.

"Chandala, I believe. A real running sore of a planet, but we won't be here long; it's just a message stop."

"Oh? What's the matter with the place? Barbaric?"

"No, not in the usual sense. It's classified as a civilized planet. It's just sick, that's all. Most of the population is being killed off."

"A pandemic?" Naysmith said slowly. "That doesn't sound like a civilized planet."

"It's hard to explain," I said. "It's not just one plague. There are scores of them going. I suppose the simple way to put it is to say that the culture of Chandala doesn't believe in sanitation—but that's not really true either. They believe in it, thoroughly, but they don't practice it very much. In fact a large part of the time they practice it in reverse."

"In reverse? That doesn't make any sense."

"I warned you it was hard to explain. I mean that public health there is a privilege. The ruling classes make it unavailable to the people they govern, as a means of keeping them in line."

"But that's insane!" Naysmith exclaimed.

"I suppose it is, by our ideals. It's obviously very hard to keep under control, anyhow; the rulers often suffer as much as the ruled. But all governments are

based on the monopoly of the right to use violence—only the weapons vary from planet to planet. This one is Chandala's. And the Heart stars have decided not to interfere."

HE FELL SILENT. I probably had not needed to remind him that what the federation we call the Heart stars decided to do, or not to do, was often very difficult to riddle. Its records reach back about a million years, which however cover only its period of stability. Probably it is as much as twice that old. No Arm II planet belonged to the group yet. Earth could be expected to be allowed to join in about 45,000 years—and that was what remained of half our originally allotted trial period; the cut was awarded us after our treaty with the star-dwelling race of Angels. In the meantime, we could expect no help . . . nor could Chandala. Earth was fortunate to be allowed any intercourse whatsoever with the Heart stars; there again, we could thank the Angels—who live forever—for vouching for us.

"Dr. Rosenbaum," Naysmith said slowly, "do you think that's right and proper?"

So he had recognized me after all. He would never have bothered to look up my name on the roster.

"Well, no, I suppose not. But

the rule is that every planet is to be allowed to go to hell in its own handbasket. It isn't my rule, or the Earth's rule; but there it is. The Heart stars just won't be bothered with any world that can't achieve stability by itself. They have seen too many of them come and go."

"I think there's more to it than that. Some of the planets that failed to get into the federation failed because they got into planet-wide wars—or into wars with each other."

"Sure," I said, puzzled. "That's just the kind of thing the Heart stars have no use for."

"So they didn't interfere to stop the wars."

"No." Now I was beginning to see what he was driving at, but he bore down on me relentlessly all the same.

"So there is in fact no Heart star rule that we can't help Chandala if we want to. In fact doing so may not even prejudice our case with the federation. We just don't know."

"I suppose that's true, but—"

"And in fact it might help us? We don't know that either?"

"No, we don't," I admitted, but my patience was beginning to run out. It had been a long night. "All we do know is that the Heart stars follow certain rules of their own. Common sense suggests that our chances would be best if we followed them too."

"Common sense for our remotely imaginable great-great-greatest of grandchildren, maybe. But by then conditions will have changed beyond our remotest imaginings. Half a millennium!"

"They don't change in the Heart stars. That's the whole point—stability. And above all I'd avoid picking up a stick of TDX like Chandala. It's obviously just the kind of non-survival planet the Heart stars *mean* to exclude by their rules. There'd be nothing you could do with it but blow yourself up. And there's obviously nothing we could do for it, anyhow!"

"Gently now, Doctor. Are you sure of that? Sanitation isn't the only public-health technique there is."

"I don't follow you," I said. The fact is that by now I wasn't trying very hard.

"Well," Naysmith said, "consider that there was once a thing called the Roman Empire. It owned all the known world and lasted many centuries. But fifty men with modern weapons could have conquered it, even when it was at its most powerful."

"But the Heart stars—"

"I am not talking about the Heart stars. I'm talking about Chandala. Two physicians with modern field kits could have wiped out almost all the diseases that raddled the Roman Empire. For instance, you and I."

I swallowed and looked at my watch. We were still a good two hours away from takeoff time.

"No, Doctor, you'll have to answer me. Shall we try it?"

I could still stall, though I was not hopeful that it would help me much. "I don't understand your motives, Dr. Naysmith. What do you want to try it *for*? The Chandalese are satisfied with their system. They won't thank you for trying to upset it. And where's the profit? I can't see any."

"What kind of profit are you talking about?" Naysmith said, almost abstractedly.

"Well . . . I don't know; that's what I'm asking you. It seems to me you shouldn't lack for money by now. And as for honor, you're up to your eyebrows in that already, and after Bbenaf you'll have much more. And yet you seem to be proposing to throw all that away for a moribund world you never heard of until tonight. And your life, too. They would kill you instantly down there if they knew what you had in mind."

"I don't plan to tell the ruling class, whatever that is, what I have in mind," Naysmith said. "I have that much sense. As for my motives . . . they're properly my own. But I can satisfy your curiosity a little. I know what you see when you look at

me: a society doctor. It's not an unusual opinion. My record supports it. Isn't that true?"

I didn't nod, but my silence must have given my assent.

"Yes, it's true, of course. And if I had excuses, I wouldn't give a damn for your opinion—or for Chandala. But you see, I don't. I not only know what the opinion of me is, but *I share it myself*. Now I see a chance to change that opinion of me; not yours, but mine. Does that help you any?"

"It did. Every man has his own holy grail. Naysmith had just identified his.

"I wish you luck."

"But you won't go along?"

"No," I said, miserable, yet defiantly sure that there were *no* good reasons why I should join Naysmith's quest—not even the reason that it could not succeed without me and my field kit. It could not succeed with me, either; and my duty lay with the ship, until the day when I might sight my own Grail, whatever that might be. All the same, that one word made me feel like an assassin.

But it did not surprise Naysmith. He had had the good sense to expect nothing else. Whatever the practical notions that had sprung into his head in the last hour or so, and I suppose they were many, he must have known all his life—as we all do—that

Grail-hunting is essentially the loneliest of hobbies.

HE MADE HIMSELF wholly unpopular on the bridge, which up to now had barely known he was aboard, wangling a ship's gig and a twenty-four hour delay during which he could be force-fed the language of the nearest city-state by a heuristics expert, and then disembarked. The arrangement was that we were to pick him up on our next cruise, a year from now.

If he had to get off the planet before then, he could go into orbit and wait; he had supplies enough. He also had his full field medical kit, including a space-suit. Since it is of the nature of Chandalese political geography to shift without notice, he agreed to base himself on the edge of a volcanic region which we could easily identify from space, yet small enough so that we wouldn't have to map it to find the gig.

Then he left. Everything went without incident (he told me later) until he entered the city-state of Gandu, whose language he had and where our embassy was. He had of course been told that the Chandalese, though humanoid, are three times as tall as Earthmen, but it was a little unnerving all the same to walk among them. Their size suited their world, which was a good 12,000 miles in diameter. Sur-

prisingly, it was not very dense, a fact nobody had been able to explain, since it was obviously an Earthlike planet; hence there was no gravitational impediment to growing its natives very large, and grow large they had. He would have to do much of his doctoring here on a stepladder, apparently.

The charge d'affairs at the embassy, like those of us on ship, did his best to dissuade Naysmith.

"I don't say that you can't do something about the situation here," he said. "Very likely you can. But you'll be meddling with their social structure. Public health here is politics, and vice versa. The Heart stars—"

"Bother the Heart stars," Naysmith said, thereby giving the charge d'affairs the worst fright he had had in years. "If it can be done, it ought to be done. And the best way to do it is to go right to the worst trouble spot."

"That would be Iridu, down the river some fifteen miles," the charge d'affairs said. "Dying out very rapidly. But it's proscribed, as all those places are."

"Criminal. What about language?"

"Oh, same as here. It's one of three cities that spoke the same tongue. The third one is dead."

"Where do I go to see the head man?"

"To the sewer. He'll be there."

Naysmith stared.

"Well, I'm sorry, but that's the way things are. When you came through the maij plaza here, did you see two tall totem poles?"

"Yes."

"The city totems always mark the local entrance to the Grand Sewer of Chandala, and the big stone building behind them is always where the priest-chief lives. And I'm warning you, Dr. Naysmith, he won't give you the time of day."

Naysmith did not bother to argue any more. It seemed to him that no matter how thoroughly a chieftan may subscribe to a political system, he becomes a rebel when it is turned against him—especially if as a consequence he sees his people dying all around him. He left, and went downriver, on a vessel rather like a felucca.

He had enough acumen to realize very early that he was being trailed. One of the two Chandalese following him looked very like a man who had been on duty at the embassy. He did not let it bother him, and in any event, they did not seem to follow him past the gates of Iridu.

He found the central plaza easily enough—that is to say, he was never lost; the physical act of getting through the streets

was anything but easy, though he was towing his gear on an anti-grav unit. They were heaped with refuse and bodies. Those who still lived made no attempt to clear away the dead or help the dying, but simply sat in the doorways and moaned. The composite sound thrummed through the whole city. Now and then he saw small groups scavenging for food amid all the garbage; and quite frequently he saw individuals drinking from puddles. This last fact perplexed him particularly, for the charge d'affairs had told him plainly that Chandala boasted excellent water supply systems.

The reception of the chief-priest was hostile enough, more so than Naysmith had hoped, yet less than the charge d'affairs had predicted—at least at first. He was obviously sick himself, and seemingly had not bathed in a long time, nor had any of his attendants; but as long as all Naysmith wanted was information, he was grudgingly willing to give it.

"What you observe are the Articles of the Law and their consequences," he said. "Because of high failures before the gods, Iridu and all its people have been abased to the lowest caste; and since it is not meet that people of this caste speak the same tongue as the Exalted, the city is proscribed."

"I can understand that," Naysmith said, guardedly. "But why should that prevent you from taking any care of yourselves? Drinking from puddles—"

"These are the rules for our caste," the priest-chief said. "Not to wash; not to eat aught less than three days old; not to aid the sick or bury the dead. Drinking from puddles is graciously allowed us."

There was no apparent ironic intention in the last sentence. Naysmith said, "Graciously?"

"The water in the city's plumbing now comes directly from the Grand Sewer. The only other alternative is the urine of the abah, but that is for holy men doing penance for the people."

This was a setback. Without decent water he would be sadly handicapped, and obviously what came out of the faucets was not under the control of the doomed city.

"Well, we'll manage somehow. Rain barrels should serve for the time being; I can chlorinate them for you. But it's urgent to start cleaning things up, otherwise I'll never be able to keep up with all the new cases. Will you help me?"

The priest-chief looked blank. "We can help no one any more, little one."

"You could be a big help. I can probably stop this plague for you, with a few willing hands."

The priest-chief stood up, shakily, but part of his shakiness was black rage. "To break the rules of caste is the highest of failures before the gods," he said. "We are damned to listen to such counsels! Kill him!"

Naysmith was fool enough to pause to protest. Only the fact that most of the gigantic soldiers in the chamber were clumsy with disease, and unused to dealing with so small an object as he, got him out of the building alive. He was pursued to the farther gate of Iridu by a shambling and horrible mob, all the more frightening because there was hardly a healthy creature in its rank.

Outside, he was confronted by a seemingly trackless jungle. He plunged in at hazard, and kept going blindly until he could no longer hear the noise of the pack; evidently they had stopped at the gate. He could thank the proscription of the city-nation for that.

On the other hand, he was lost.

Of course, he had his compass, which might help a little. He did not want to go westward, which would take him back to the river, but also into the vicinity of Iridu again. Besides, his two trackers from Gandu might still be lurking at the west gate, and this time their hostility might be a good deal more active. Striking north-north-west toward Gandu

itself was open to the same objection. There seemed to be nothing for it but to go north-north-east, in the hope of arriving at the field of fumaroles and hot springs where his ship was, there to take thought.

He was still utterly determined to try again; shaken though he was, he was convinced that this first failure was only a matter of tactics. But he did have to get back to the ship.

He pushed forward through the wiry tangle. It made it impossible for him to follow a straight compass course; he lost hours climbing and skirting and hacking, and began to worry about the possibility of spending the night in this wilderness. With the thought, there was a sodden thump behind him, and he was stopped as though he had run into a wall. Then there was a diminishing crackle and bumping over his head.

What was holding him back, he realized after a moment, was the tow to his gear. He back-tracked. The gear was lying on the moist ground. Some incredibly tough vine had cut the anti-grav unit free of it; the other sound he heard had been the unit fighting its way skyward.

Now what? He could not possibly drag all this weight. It occurred to him that he might put on the spacesuit; that would slow him a good deal, but it

would also protect him from the underbrush, which had already slashed him pretty painfully. The rest of the load—a pack and two oxygen bottles—would still be heavy, but maybe not impossibly so.

He got the suit on, though it was difficult without help, and lumbered forward again. It was exhausting, even with the suit's air-conditioning to help, but there was nothing he could do about that. At least, if he had to sleep in the jungle, the suit might also keep out vermin, and some larger entities. . . .

For some reason, however, the Chandalese forest seemed peculiarly free of large animals. Occasional scamperings and brief glimpses told of creatures which might have been a little like antelope, or like rabbits, but even these were scarce; and there were no cries of predators. This might have been because Chandalese predators were voiceless, but Naysmith doubted this on grounds of simple biology; it seemed more likely that most of the more highly organized wild life of Chandala had long since been decimated by the plagues the owners of the planet cultivated as though they were ornamental gardens.

LATE in the afternoon, the fates awarded him two lucky breaks. The first of these was a

carcas, or rather, a shell. It was the greenish-brown carapace of some creature which, from its size, he first took to be the Chandalese equivalent of a huge land-turtle, but on closer examination seemed actually to have been a good deal more like a tick. Well, if any planet had ticks as big as rowboats, it would be Chandala, that much was already plain even to Naysmith. In any event, the shell made an excellent skid for his gear, riding on its back through the undergrowth almost as though it had been designed for the task.

The second boon was the road. He did not recognize it as such at first, for it was much broken and overgrown, but on reflection he decided that this was all to the good; a road that had not been in use for a long time would be a road on which he would be unlikely to meet anybody. It would also not be likely to take him to any populated place, but it seemed to be headed more or less in the direction he wanted to go; and if it meandered a little, it could hardly impose upon him more detours than the jungle did.

He took off the spacesuit and loaded it into the skid, feeling almost cheerful.

It was dusk when he rounded the bend and saw the dead city. In the gathering bloom, it looked to be almost twice the size of

Gandu, despite the fact that much of it had crumbled and fallen.

At its open gates stood the two Chandalese who had followed him downriver, leaning on broad-bladed spears as tall as they were.

Naysmith had a gun; and he did not hesitate.

Had he not recognized the face of the Chandalese from the charge d'affairs' office, he might have assumed that the two guards were members of some savage tribe. Again, it seemed to him, he had been lucky.

It might be the last such stroke of luck. The presence of the guards testified, almost in letters of fire, that the Chandalese could predict his route with good accuracy—and the spears testified that they did not mean to let him complete it.

Again, it seemed to him that his best chance led through the dead city, protected while he was there by its proscription. He could only hope that the firelands lay within some reachable distance of the city's other side.

The ancient gate towered over him like the Lion Gate of Mycena as remembered from some nightmare—fully as frowning as that narrow, heavy, tragedy-ridden breach, but more than five times as high. He studied it with sober respect, and perhaps even a little

dread, before he could bring himself to step over the bodies of the guards and pass through it. When he did, he was carrying with him one of the broad-bladed fifteen-foot spears, because, he told himself, you never could tell when such a lever might come in handy . . . and because, instinctively, he believed (though he later denied it) that no stranger could pass under that ancient arch without one.

The Atridae, it is very clear, still mutter in their sleep not far below the surface of our waking minds, for all that we no longer allow old Freud to cram our lives back into the strait-jackets of those old religious plays. Perhaps one of the changes in us that the Heart stars await is the extirpation of these last shadows of Oedipus, Elektra, Agamemnon and all those other dark and bloody figures from the way we think.

Or maybe not. There are still some 40,000 years to go. If after that they tell us that that was one of the things they were waiting for, we probably won't understand what they're talking about.

Carrying the spear awkwardly and towing his belongings behind him in the tick-shell, Naysmith plodded toward the center of the dead city. There was nothing left in the streets but an oc-

casional large bone; one that he stumbled over fell promptly to shivers and dust. The scraping noise of his awkward sledge echoed off the fronts of the leaning buildings; otherwise there was no sound but the end-stopped thuds of his footfalls, and an occasional bluster of evening wind around the tottering, flaking cornices far above his bent head.

In this wise he came draggingly at last into the central plaza, and sat down on a drum of a fallen stone pillar to catch his breath. It was now almost full dark, so dark that nothing cast a shadow any more; instead, the night seemed to be soaking into the ground all around him. There would be, he knew already, no stars; the atmosphere of Chandala was too misty for that. He had perhaps fifteen minutes more to decide what he was going to do.

As he mopped his brow and tried to think, something rustled behind him. Freezing, he looked carefully over his shoulder, back toward the way he had come. Of course he saw nothing; but in this dead silence a sound like that was easy to interpret.

They were still following him. For him, this dead city was not a proscribed sanctuary. Or if it ever had been, it was no longer, since he had killed the two guards.

He stood up, as soundlessly as he could. All his muscles were aching; he felt as soft and helpless as an overripe melon. The shuffling noise stopped at once.

They were already close enough to see him!

He knew that he could vanish quickly enough into any of the tomb-like buildings around him, and evade them for a while as deftly as any rat. They probably knew this labyrinth little better than he did, and the sound of their shuffling did not suggest that there were many of them—surely not a large enough force to search a whole city for a man only a third as big as a Chandalese. And they would have to respect taboos that he could scamper past out of simple ignorance.

But if he took that way, he would have to abandon his gear. He could carry his medical kit easily enough, but that was less important to him now than the space-suit and its ancillary oxygen bottles—both heavy and clumsy, and both furthermore painted white. As long as he could drag them with him in the tick-shell their whiteness would be masked to some extent; but if he had to run with them, he would surely be brought down.

In the last remains of the evening, he stood cautiously forward and inched the sledge toward the center of the plaza, clenching the spear precariously

against his side under one armpit, his gun in his other hand. Behind him, something went, *Scuffle . . . rustle . . .*

As he had seen on arrival, the broad-mouthed well in the center of the plaza, before the house of the dead and damned priest-chief, was not flanked by the totems he had been taught to expect. Where they should be jutted only two grey and splintered stumps, as though the poles had been pushed over by brute force and toppled into the abyss. On the other side of the well, a stone beast—an abah?—stared forever downward with blind eyes, ready to rend any soul who might try to clamber up again from Hell.

As it might try to do; for a narrow, railless stone stairway, slimy and worn, spiralled around the well into the depths.

Around the mouth of the well, almost impossible to see, let alone interpret, in the last glimmers, was a series of bas-reliefs, crudely and hastily cut; he could detect the rawness of the sculpturing even under the weathering of the stone and the moss.

He went cautiously down the steps a little way to look at them. With no experience whatsoever of Chandalese graphic conventions, he knew that he had little chance of understanding them even had he seen them in full daylight. Nevertheless, it was

clear that they told a history . . . and, it seemed to him, a judgment. This city had been condemned, and its totems toppled, because it had been carrying on some kind of congress with the Abyss.

He climbed back to the surface of the plaza, pulling his nose thoughtfully. They were still following him, that was sure. But would they follow him down there? It might be a way to get to the other side of the dead city which would promise him immunity—or at least, a temporary sanctuary of an inverted kind.

He did not delude himself that he could live down there for long. He would have to wear the spacesuit again, and breathe nothing but the oxygen in the white bottles. He could still keep by him the field medical kit with which he had been planning to re-enrich his opinion of himself, and save a planet; but even with this protection he could not for long breathe the air and drink the water of the pit. As for food, that hardly mattered, because his air and water would run out much sooner.

Let it be said that Naysmith was courageous. He donned the spacesuit again, and began the descent, lowering his tick-shell coracle before him on a short taut tether. Bump, bump, bump went the shell down the steps ahead of him, teetering on its

back ridge, threatening to slip sidewise and fall into the well at every irregularity in the slimy old platforms. Then he would stop in the blackness and wait until he could no longer hear it rocking. Then down again: bump, bump, bump; step, step, step. Behind him, the butt of the spear scraped against the wall; and once the point lodged abruptly in some chink and nearly threw him.

He had his chest torch going, but it was not much help; the slimy walls of the well seemed to soak up the light, except for an occasional delusive reflection where a rill of seepage oozed down amid the nitre. Down, down, down.

After some centuries he no longer expected to reach the bottom. There was nothing left in his future but this painful descent. He was still not frightened; only numb, exhausted, beyond caring about himself, beyond believing in the rest of the universe.

Then the steps stopped, sending him staggering in the suit. He touched the wall with a glove—he imagined that he could feel its coldness, though of course he could not—and stood still. His belt radios brought him in nothing but a sort of generalized echo, like running water.

Of course. He flashed the

chest-light around, and saw the Grand Sewer of Chandala.

He was standing on what appeared to be a wharf made of black basalt, over the edge of which rushed the black waters of an oily river, topped with spinning masses of soapy froth. He could not see the other side, nor the roof of the tunnel it ran in—only the sullen and ceaseless flood, like a cataract of ink. The wharf itself had evidently been awash not long since, for there were still pools standing sullenly wherever the black rock had been worn down; but now the surface of the river was perhaps a foot below the level of the dock.

He looked up. Far aloft, he saw a spot of blue-black sky about the size of a pea, and gleaming in it, one reddish star. Though he was no better a judge of distance than any other surgeon or some other man who spends his life doing close work, he thought he was at least a mile beneath the surface. To clamber back up there would be utterly beyond him.

But why a wharf? Who would be embarking on this sunless river, and why? It suggested that the river might go toward some other inhabited place . . . or some place that had once been inhabited. Maybe the Chandalese had been right in condemning the city to death for congress with the pit—and if that Other

Place were inhabited even now, it was probably itself underground, and populated by whatever kind of thing might enjoy and prosper by living in total darkness by the side of a sewer—

There was an ear-splitting explosion to Naysmith's right, and something struck his suit just under his armpit. He jerked his light toward the sound, just in time to see fragments of rock scampering away across the wet wharf, skidding and splashing. A heavier piece rolled eccentrically to the edge of the dock and dropped off into the river. Then everything was motionless again.

He bent and picked up the nearest piece. It was part of one of the stones of the staircase.

There was no sanctuary, even here; they were following him down. In a few moments it might occur to them to stone him on purpose; the suit could stand that, but the helmet could not. And above all he had to keep his air pure.

He had to go on. But there was no longer any walk-way; only the wharf and the sewer. Well, then, that way. Grimly he unloaded the tick-shell and lowered it into the black water, hitching its tether to a basalt post. Then, carefully, he ballasted it with the pack and the oxygen bottles. It rocked gently in the current, but the ridge along its back served as

a rudimentary keel; it would be stable, more or less.

He sat down on the edge of the wharf and dangled his feet into his boat while he probed for the bottom of the river with the point of the spear. The point caught on something after he had thrust nearly twelve feet of the shaft beneath the surface; and steadying himself with this, he transferred his weight into the coracle and sat down.

Smash! Another paving stone broke on the dock. A splinter, evidently a large one, went whooshing past his helmet and dropped into the sewer. Hastily he jerked the loop of the tether off the basalt post, and poled himself hard out into the middle of the torrent.

THE wharf vanished. The shell began to turn round and round. After several minutes, during which he became deathly seasick, Naysmith managed to work out how to use the blade of the spear as a kind of steering oar; if he held it hard against one side of the shell at the back, and shifted the shaft with the vagaries of the current, he could at least keep his frail machine pointed forward.

There was no particular point in steering it any better than that, since he did not know where he was going.

The chest-light showed him

nothing except an occasional glimpse of a swiftly-passing tunnel wall, and after a while he shut it off to conserve power, trusting to his sense of balance to keep his shell headed forward and in the middle of the current. Then he struck some obstacle which almost upset him; and though he fought himself back into balance again, the shell seemed sluggish afterwards. He put on the light and discovered that he had shipped so much of the slimy water that the shell was riding only a few inches above the roiling river.

He ripped the flap of his pack open and found a cup to bail with. Thereafter, he kept the light on.

After a while, the noise of the water took on a sort of hissing edge. He hardly noticed it at first; but soon it became sharp, like the squeak of a wet finger on the edge of a glass, and then took on deeper tones until it made the waters boil like the noise of a steam whistle. Turning the belt radio down did him very little good; it dropped the volume of the sound, but not its penetrating quality.

Then the coracle went skidding around a long bend and light burst over him.

He was hurtling past a city, fronted by black basalt docks like the one he had just quitted, but four or five times more ex-

tensive. Beyond these were ruins, as far as he could see, tumbled and razed, stark in the unwavering flare of five tall smokeless plumes of gas flames which towered amid the tumbled stones. It was these five fountains of blue-white fire, as tall as sequoias, which poured out the vast organ-diapason of noise he had heard in the tunnel.

They were probably natural, though he had never seen anything like them before. The ruins, much more obviously, were not; and for them there was no explanation. Broken and aged though they were, the great carved stones still preserved the shapes of geometrical solids which could not possibly have been reassembled into any building Naysmith could imagine, though as a master surgeon he had traded all his life on structural visualization. The size of the pieces did not bother him, for he had come to terms with the fact that the Chandalese were three times as tall as men, but their shapes were as irrational as the solid geometry of dream.

And the crazy way in which the city had been dumped over, as though something vast and stupid had sat down in the middle of it and lashed a long heavy tail, did not suggest that its destroyers had been Chandalese either.

Then it was gone. He clung to his oar, keeping the coracle pointed forward. He did not relish the thought of going on to a possible meeting with the creatures who had razed that city; but obviously there had been no hope for him in its ruins. It dwindled and dimmed, and then he went wobbling around a bend and even its glow vanished from the sides of the tunnel.

As he turned that corner, something behind him shrieked, cutting through the general roar of noise like a god in torture. He shrank down into the bottom of the boat, almost losing his hold on the spear. The awful yell must have gone on for two or three minutes, utterly overpowering every echo. Then, gradually, it began to die, at first into a sort of hopeless howl, then into a series of raw hoarse wails, and at last into a choked mixture of weeping and giggling . . . Oh! oooh! . . . Whee! . . . oh, oh, oh . . . whee! . . . which made Naysmith's every hair stand on end. It was, obviously, only one of the high-pressure gas jets fluting over a rock lip.

Obviously.

After that he was glad to be back in the darkness, however little it promised. The boat bobbed and slithered in the midst of the flood. On turns it was washed against the walls and Naysmith poled it back into the

center of the current as best he could with his break-bone spear, which kept knocking him about the helmet and ribs every time he tried to use it for anything but steering. Some of those collisions were inexplicably soft; he did not try to see why, because he was saving the chest-light for baling, and in any event he was swept by them too fast to look back.

Just under him gurgled the Grand Sewer of Chandala, a torrent of filth and pestilence. He floated down it inside his suit, Naysmith, master surgeon, a bubble of precarious life in a universe of corruption, skimming the entropy gradient clinging to the edges of a tick's carapace . . . and clinging to incorruption to the last.

AGAIN, after a while, he saw a light ahead, sullenly red at first, but becoming more and more orange as the boat swept on. For the first time he saw the limits of the tunnel, outlined ahead of him in the form of a broad arch. Could he possibly be approaching the surface? It did not seem possible; it was night up there—and besides, Chandalese daylight was nothing like this.

Then the tunnel mouth was behind him, and he was coasting on an enormous infernal sea.

The light was now a brilliant

tangerine color, but he could not see where it came from; billowing clouds of mist rising from the surface of the sewage limited visibility to perhaps fifty feet. The current from the river was quickly dissipated, and the coracle began to drift sidewise; probing with the spear without much hope, he was surprised to touch bottom, and began to pole himself forward with the aid of his compass—though he had almost forgotten why it was that he had wanted to go in that direction.

The bottom was mucky, as was of course to have been expected; pulling the spear out of it was tiring work. Far overhead in the mists, he twice heard an odd fluttering sound, rather like that of a tightly wound rubber-band suddenly released, and once a measured flapping which seemed to pass quite low over his head; he saw nothing, however.

After half an hour he stopped poling to give himself five minute's rest. Again he began to drift sidewise. Insofar as he could tell, the whole of this infernal deep seemed to be eddying in a slow circle.

Then a tall, slender shadow loomed ahead of him. He drove the spear into the bottom and anchored himself, watching intently, but the shadow remained fixed. Finally he pushed the shell cautiously toward it.

It was a totem pole, obviously very old; almost all its paint was gone, and the exposed wood was grey. There were others ahead; within a few moments he was in what was almost a forest of them, their many mute faces grinning and grimacing at him or staring hopelessly off into the mists. Some of them were canted alarmingly and seemed to be on the verge of falling into the ordure, but even with these he found it hard to set aside the impression that they were watching him.

There was, he realized slowly, a reason for this absurd, frightening feeling. The totems testified to something more than the deaths of uncountable thousands of Chandalese. They were witness also to the fact that this gulf was known and visited, at least by the priest-chief caste; obviously the driving of the poles in this abyss was the final ritual act of condemnation of a city-state. He was not safe from pursuit yet.

And what, he found himself wondering despite his desperation, could it possibly be all about—this completely deliberate, systematic slaughter of whole nations of one's fellow beings by pestilence contrived and abetted? It was certainly not a form of warfare; that he might have understood. It was more like the extermination of

the rabbits of Australia by infecting them with a plague. He remembered very dimly that the first settlers of North America had tried, unsuccessfully, to spread smallpox among the Indians for the same reason; but the memory seemed to be no help in understanding Chandala.

Again he heard that rhythmic sound, now much closer, and something large and peculiarly rubbery went by him, almost on a level with his shoulders. At his sudden movement, it rose and perched briefly on one of the totems, just too far ahead in the mist to be clearly visible.

He had not the slightest desire to get any closer to it, but the current was carrying him that way. As he approached, dragging the blade of the spear fruitlessly, the thing seemed to fall off the pole, and with a sudden flap of wings—he could just make out their spread, which seemed to be about four feet—disappeared into the murk.

He touched his gun. It did not reassure him much. It occurred to him that since this sea was visited, anything that lived here might hesitate to attack him, but he knew he could not count on that. The Chandalese might well have truces with such creatures which would not protect Naysmith for an instant. It was imperative to keep going, and if possible, to get out.

The totem poles were beginning to thin out. He could see high-water marks on the remaining ones, which meant that the underground ocean was large enough to show tides, but he had no idea what size that indicated; for one thing, he knew neither the mass nor the distance of Chandala's moon. He did remember, however, that he had seen no tide-marks as he had entered the forest of idols, which meant that it was ebbing now; and it seemed to him that the current was distinctly faster than before.

He poled forward vigorously. Several times he heard the flapping noise and the fluttering sounds again, and not these alone. There were other noises. Some of them were impossible to interpret, and some of them so suggestive that he could only pray that he was wrong about them. For a while he tried shutting the radio off, but he found the silence inside the helmet even less possible to endure, as well as cutting him off from possible cues to pursuit.

But the current continued to pick up, and shortly he noticed that he was casting a shadow into the shell before him. If the source of the light, whatever it was, was over the center of the sea, it was either relatively or he had come a long distance; perhaps both.

Then there was a wall looming to his left side. Five more long thrusts with the spear, and there was another on his right. The light dimmed; the water ran faster.

He was back on a river again. By the time the blackness closed down the current was rushing, and once more he was forced to sit down and use the spear as a steering oar. Again ahead of him he heard the scream of gas jets.

Mixed with that sound was another noise, a prolonged roaring which at first completely baffled him. Then, suddenly, he recognized it; it was the sound of a great cataract.

Frantically he flashed his light about. There was a ledge of sorts beside the torrent, but he was going so fast now that to make a leap for it would risk smashing his helmet. All the same, he had no choice. He thrust the skidding coracle toward the wall and jumped.

He struck fair, on his feet. He secured his balance in time to see the shell swept away, with his pack and spare oxygen bottles.

For a reason he cannot now explain, this amused him.

This, as Naysmith chooses to tell it, is the end of the meaningful part of the story, though by no means the end of his travails; these he dismisses as "scenery".

As his historian I can't be quite so offhand about them, but he has supplied me with few details to go by.

He found the cataract, not very far ahead; evidently he had jumped none too soon. As its sound had suggested, it was a monster, leaping over an underground cliff which he guesses must have been four or five miles high, into a cavern which might have been the Great Gulf itself. He says, and I think he is right, that we now have an explanation for the low density of Chandala: if the rest of it has as much underground area as the part he saw, its crust must be extremely porous. By this reckoning, the Chandalese underworld must have almost the surface area of Mars.

It must have seemed a world to itself indeed to Naysmith, standing on the rim of that gulf and looking down at its fire-filled floor. Where the cataract struck, steam rose in huge billows and plumes, and with a scream which forced him to shut off the radio at once. Occasionally the ground shook faintly under his feet.

Face to face with hell, Naysmith found reason to hope. This inferno, it seemed to him, might well underlie the region of hot springs, geysers and fumaroles toward which he had been heading from the beginning; and if so there should be dead volcanic

funnels through which he might escape to the surface. This proved to be the case; but first he had to pick his way around the edge of the abyss to search for one, starting occasional rock-slides, the heat blasting through his helmet, and all in the most profound and unnatural silence. If this is scenery, I prefer not to be offered any more scenic vacations.

"But on the way, I figured it out," Naysmith told me. "Rituals don't grow without a reason—especially not rituals involving a whole culture. This one has a reason that I should have been the first to see—or any physician should. You, too."

"Thanks. But I don't see it. If the Heart stars do, they aren't telling."

"They must think it's obvious," Naysmith said. "It's eugenics. Most planets select for better genes by controlling breeding. The Chandalese do it by genocide. They force their lower castes to kill themselves off."

"Ugh. Are you sure? Is it scientific? I don't see how it could be, under the circumstances."

"Well, I don't have all the data. But I think a really thorough study of Chandalese history, with a statistician to help, would show that it is. It's also an enormously dangerous method and it may wind up with the whole planet dead; that's the

chance they're taking, and I assume they're aware of it."

"Well," I said, "assuming that it does work, I wouldn't admit a planet that 'survived' by that method into any federation I ran."

"No," Naysmith said soberly. "Neither would I. And there's the rub, you see, because the Heart stars will. That's what shook me. I may have been a lousy doctor—and don't waste your breath denying it, you know what I mean—but I've been giving at least lip-service to all our standard humanitarian assumptions all my life, without ever examining them. What the Chandalese face up to, and we don't, is that death is now and has always been *the* drive-wheel of evolution. They not only face up to it, they use it.

"When I was down there in the middle of that sewer, I was in the middle of my own *Goetzendaemerung*—the twilight of the idols that Nietzsche speaks of. I could see all the totems of my own world, of my own life, falling into the muck . . . shooting like logs over the brink into hell. And it was then that I knew I couldn't be a surgeon any more."

"Come now," I said. "You'll get over it. After all, it's just another planet with strange customs. There are millions of them."

"You weren't there," Naysmith said, looking over my shoulder at nothing. "For you, that's all it is. For me . . . 'No other taste shall change this.' Don't you see? All planets are Chandalas. It's not just that hell is real. The laws that run it are the laws of life everywhere."

His gaze returned to me. It made me horribly uneasy.

"What was it Mephistopheles said? 'Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.' The totems are falling all around us as we sit here.

One by one, Rosenbaum; one by one."

And that is how we lost Naysmith. It would have been easy enough to say simply that he had a desperate experience on a savage planet and that it damaged his sanity, and let it go at that. But it would not be true. I would dismiss it that way myself if I could.

But I cannot bring myself to forget that the Heart stars classify Chandalas as a civilized world.

THE END



"I don't know—maybe it's the automatic pilot?!"

Several months ago a magazine named Playboy, which concentrates editorially on girls, books, girls, art, girls, music, fashion, girls, and girls, published an article about old-time science-fiction. Called "Girls for the Slime God," it was illustrated with synthetic covers of non-existent sf magazines, each replete with bug-eyed monster, mad scientist, and partially naked, nubile girl.

But the article quickly disillusioned the reader. It bemoaned the fact that current sf magazines seem to abjure sex. Evidently to titillate its readers, the Playboy article then went on to quote some of the allegedly erotic descriptions from sf magazines of a generation ago. But even then, it seems, Playboy had a hard time finding sexy stuff. It acknowledges that only one magazine, even in those days, went around regularly ripping the clothes off earth-girls and exposing their ivory bosoms.

We at Amazing felt kind of sorry for the Playboy people. You know, no more really exciting stuff in the sf mags, and all that. How're you going to get your kicks any more if these sf writers start talking about cultural taboos instead of heaving breasts? Compassion is our middle name. We commissioned one of sf's most sex-appealing writers to create a story especially for the insatiable Playboy, and to prove to him that sf has not forgotten that S-X is the most important thing in the Universe.

PLAYBOY AND THE SLIME GOD

By ISAAC ASIMOV

Illustrated by SUMMERS



BUT these are two species," said Captain Garm, peering closely at the creatures that had been brought up from the planet below. His optic organs adjusted focus to maximum sharpness, bulging outwards as they did so. The color patch above them gleamed in quick flashes.

Botax felt warmly comfortable to be following color-changes once again, after months in a spy cell on the planet, trying to make sense out of the modulated sound waves emitted by the natives. Communication by flash was almost like being home in the far-off Perseus arm of the Galaxy. "Not two species," he said, "but two forms of one species."

"Nonsense, they look quite different. Vaguely Perse-like, thank the Entity, and not as disgusting in appearance as so many out-forms are. Reasonable shape, recognizable limbs. But no color-patch. Can they speak?"

"Yes, Captain Garm," Botax indulged in a discreetly disappearing prismatic interlude. "The details are in my report. These creatures form sound waves by way of throat and mouth, something like complicated coughing. I have learned to do it myself." He was quietly proud. "It is very difficult."

"It must be stomach-turning. Well, that accounts for their flat, unextensible eyes. Not to speak by color makes eyes largely use-

less. Meanwhile, how can you insist these are a single species? The one on the left is smaller and has longer tendrils, or whatever it is, and seems differently proportioned. It bulges where this other does not. —Are they alive?"

"Alive but not at the moment conscious, Captain. They have been psycho-treated to repress fright in order that they might be studied easily."

"But are they worth study? We are behind our schedule and have at least five worlds of greater moment than this one to check and explore. Maintaining a time-stasis unit is expensive and I would like to return them and go on—"

But Botax's moist spindly body was fairly vibrating with anxiety. His tubular tongue flicked out and curved up and over his flat nose, while his eyes sucked inward. His splayed three-fingered hand made a gesture of negation as his speech went almost entirely into the deep red.

"Entity save us, Captain, for no world is of greater moment to us than this one. We may be facing a supreme crisis. These creatures could be the most dangerous life-forms in the Galaxy, Captain, just *because* there are two forms."

"I don't follow you."

"Captain, it has been my job to study this planet, and it has been most difficult, for it is unique. It is so unique that I can scarcely comprehend its facets. For instance, almost all life on the planet consists of species in two forms. There are no words to describe it, no concepts even. I can only speak of them as first form and second form. If I may use their sounds, the little one is called 'female,' and the big one, here, 'male', so the creatures themselves are aware of the difference."

Garm winced, "What a disgusting means of communication."

"And, Captain, in order to bring forth young, the two forms must cooperate."

The Captain, who had bent forward to examine the specimens closely with an expression compounded of interest and revulsion, straightened at once. "Cooperate? What nonsense is this? There is no more fundamental attribute of life than that each living creature bring forth its young in innermost communication with itself. What else makes life worth living?"

"The one form does bring forth life but the other form must cooperate."

"How?"

"That has been difficult to determine. It is something very private and in my search through

the available forms of literature I could find no exact and explicit description. But I have been able to make reasonable deductions."

Garm shook his head. "Ridiculous. Budding is the holiest, most private function in the world. On tens of thousands of worlds it is the same. As the great photobard, Levuline, said, "In budding-time, in budding time, in sweet, delightful budding time; when"

"Captain, you don't understand. This cooperation between forms brings about somehow (and I am not certain exactly how) a mixture and recombination of genes. It is a device by which in every generation, new combinations of characteristics are brought into existence. Variations are multiplied; mutated genes hastened into expression almost at once where under the usual budding system, millennia might pass first."

"Are you trying to tell me that the genes from one individual can be combined with those of another? Do you know how completely ridiculous that is in the light of all the principles of cellular physiology?"

"It must be so," said Botax nervously under the others pop-eyed glare. "Evolution is hastened. This planet is a riot of species. There are supposed to be a million and a quarter different species of creatures."

"A dozen and a quarter more likely. Don't accept too completely what you read in the native literature."

"I've seen dozens of radically different species myself in just a small area. I tell you, Captain, give these creatures a short space of time and they will mutate into intellects powerful enough to overtake us and rule the Galaxy."

"Prove that this cooperation you speak of exists, Investigator, and I shall consider your contentions. If you cannot, I shall dismiss all your fancies as ridiculous and we will move on."

"I can prove it." Botax's color-flashes turned intensely yellow-green. "The creatures of this world are unique in another way. They foresee advances they have not yet made, probably as a consequence of their belief in rapid change which, after all, they constantly witness. They therefore indulge in a type of literature involving the space-travel they have never developed. I have translated their term for the literature as 'science-fiction.' Now I have dealt in my readings almost exclusively with science-fiction, for there I thought, in their dreams and fancies, they would expose themselves and their danger to us. And it was from that science-fiction that I deduced the method of their inter-form cooperation."

"How did you do that?"

"There is a periodical on this world which sometimes publishes science-fiction which is, however, devoted almost entirely to the various aspects of the cooperation. It does not speak entirely freely, which is annoying, but persists in merely hinting. Its name as nearly as I can put it into flashes is 'Recreationlad.' The creature in charge, I deduce, is interested in nothing but inter-form cooperation and searches for it everywhere with a systematic and scientific intensity that has roused my awe. He has found instances of cooperation described in science-fiction and I let material in his periodical guide me. From the stories he instanced I have learned how to bring it about."

"And Captain, I beg of you, when the cooperation is accomplished and the young are brought forth before your eyes, give orders not to leave an atom of this world in existence."

"Well," said Captain Garm, wearily, "bring them into full consciousness and do what you must do quickly."

MARGE SKIDMORE was suddenly completely aware of her surroundings. She remembered very clearly the elevated station at the beginning of twilight. It had been almost empty, one man standing near her, another at the other end of the plat-

form. The approaching train had just made itself known as a faint rumble in the distance.

There had then come the flash, a sense of turning inside out, the half-seen vision of a spindly creature, dripping mucus, a rushing upward, and now—

"Oh, God," she said, shuddering. "It's still here. And there's another one, too."

She felt a sick revulsion, but no fear. She was almost proud of herself for feeling no fear. The man next to her, standing quietly, but still wearing a battered fedora, was the one who had been near her on the platform.

"They got you, too?" she asked. "Who else?"

Charlie Grimwold, feeling flabby and paunchy, tried to lift his hand to remove his hat and smooth the thin hair that broke up but did not entirely cover the skin of his scalp and found that it moved only with difficulty against a rubbery but hardening resistance. He let his hand drop and looked morosely at the thin-faced woman facing him. She was in her middle thirties, he decided, and her hair was nice and her dress fit well, but at the moment, he just wanted to be somewhere else and it did him no good at all that he had company; even female company.

He said, "I don't know, lady. I was just standing on the station platform."

"Me, too." Marge said quickly.

"And then I see a flash. Didn't hear nothing. Now here I am. Must be little men from Mars or Venus or one of them places."

Marge nodded vigorously, "That's what I figure. A flying saucer? You scared?"

"No. That's funny, you know. I think maybe I'm going nuts or I *would* be scared."

"Funny thing. I ain't scared, either. Oh, God, here comes one of them now. If he touches me, I'm going to scream. Look at those wiggly hands. And that wrinkled skin, all slimy; makes me nauseous."

Botax approached gingerly and said, in a voice at once raspy and screechy, this being the closest he could come to imitating the native timbre, "Creatures! We will not hurt you. But we must ask you if you would do us the favor of cooperating."

"Hey, it talks!" said Charlie. "What do you mean, cooperate?"

"Both of you. With each other," said Botax.

"Oh?" He looked at Marge. "You know what he means, lady?"

"Ain't got no idea whatsoever," she answered loftily.

Botax said, "What I mean—" and he used the short term he had once heard employed as a synonym for the process.

Marge turned red and said, "What!" in the loudest scream

she could manage. Both Botax and Captain Garm put their hands over their mid-regions to cover the auditory patches that trembled painfully with the decibels.

Marge went on rapidly, and nearly incoherently. "Of all things. I'm a married woman, you. If my Ed was here, you'd hear from *him*. And you, wise guy," she twisted toward Charlie against rubbery resistance, "Whoever you are, if you think —"

"Lady, lady," said Charlie in uncomfortable desperation. "It ain't my idea. I mean, far be it from me, you know, to turn down some lady, you know; but me, I'm married, too. I got three kids. Listen—"

Captain Garm said, "What's happening, Investigator Botax? These cacophonous sounds are awful."

"Well," Botax flashed a short purple patch of embarrassment. "This forms a complicated ritual. They are supposed to be reluctant at first. It heightens the subsequent result. After that initial stage, the skins must be removed."

"They have to be *skinned*?"

"Not really skinned. Those are artificial skins that can be removed painlessly, and must be. Particularly in the smaller form."

"All right, then. Tell it to remove the skins. Really, Botax, I don't find this pleasant."

"I don't think I had better tell the smaller form to remove the skins. I think we had better follow the ritual closely. I have here sections of those space-travel tales which the man from the 'Recreationlad' periodical spoke highly of. In those tales the skins are removed forcibly. Here is a description of an accident, for instance 'which played havoc with the girl's dress, ripping it nearly off her slim body. For a second, he felt the warm firmness of her half-bared bosom against his cheek—' It goes on that way. You see, the ripping, the forcible removal, acts as a stimulus."

"Bosom?" said the Captain. "I don't recognize the flash."

"I invented that to cover the meaning. It refers to the bulges on the upper dorsal region of the smaller form."

"I see. Well, tell the larger one to rip the skins off the smaller one. —What a dismal thing this is."

Botax turned to Charlie. "Sir," he said, "rip the girl's dress nearly off her slim body, will you? I will release you for the purpose."

Marge's eyes widened and she twisted toward Charlie in instant outrage. "Don't you dare do that, you. Don't you *dash* touch me, you sex maniac."

"Me?" said Charlie plaintively, "It ain't my idea. You think I go around ripping dresses? Listen," he turned to Botax, "I got a wife and three kids. She finds out I go around ripping dresses, I get clobbered. You know what my wife does when I just look at some dame. *Listen—*"

"Is he still reluctant?" said the Captain, impatiently.

"Apparently," said Botax. "The strange surroundings, you know, may be extending that stage of the cooperation. Since I know this is unpleasant for you, I will perform this stage of the ritual myself. It is frequently written in the space-travel tales that an outer-world species performs the task. For instance, here," and he rifled through his notes finding the one he wanted, "they describe a very awful such species. The creatures on the planet have foolish notions, you understand. It never occurs to them to imagine handsome individuals such as ourselves, with a fine mucous cover."

"Go on! Go on! Don't take all day," said the Captain.

"Yes, Captain. It says here that the extraterrestrial 'came forward to where the girl stood. Shrieking hysterically, she was cradled in the monster's embrace. Talons ripped blindly at her body, tearing the kirtle away in rags.' You see, the native crea-

ture is shrieking with stimulation as her skins are removed."

"Then go ahead, Botax, remove it. But please, allow no shrieking. I'm trembling all over with the sound waves."

Botax said politely to Marge, "If you don't mind—"

One spatulate finger made as though to hook on to the neck of the dress.

Marge wiggled desperately. "Don't touch. Don't touch! You'll get slime on it. Listen, this dress cost \$24.95 at Ohrbach's. Stay away, you monster. Look at those eyes on him." She was panting in her desperate efforts to dodge the groping, extra terrestrial hand. "A slimy, bug-eyed monster, that's what he is. Listen, I'll take it off myself. Just don't touch it with slime, for God's sake."

She fumbled at the zipper, and said in a hot aside to Charlie, "Don't you dast look."

Charlie closed his eyes and shrugged in resignation.

She stepped out of the dress. "All right? You satisfied?"

Captain Garm's fingers twitched with unhappiness. "Is that the bosom? Why does the other creature keep its head turned away?"

"Reluctance. Reluctance," said Botax. "Besides, the bosom is still covered. Other skins must be removed. When bared, the bosom is a very strong stimulus. It is

constantly described as ivory globes, or white spheres, or otherwise after that fashion. I have here drawings, visual picturizations, that come from the outer covers of the space-travel magazines. If you will inspect them, you will see that upon every one of them, a creature is present with a bosom more or less exposed."

The Captain looked thoughtfully from the illustrations to Marge and back. "What is ivory?"

"That is another made-up flash of my own. It represents the tusky material of one of the large sub-intelligent creatures on the planet."

"Ah," and Captain Garm went into a pastel green of satisfaction. "That explains it. This small creature is one of a warrior sect and those are tusks with which to smash the enemy."

"No, no. They are quite soft, I understand." Botax's small brown hand flicked outward in the general direction of the objects under discussion and Marge screamed and shrank away.

"Then what other purpose do they have?"

"I think," said Botax with considerable hesitation, "that they are used to feed the young."

"The young eat them?" asked the Captain with every evidence of deep distress.

"Not exactly. The objects pro-

duce a fluid which the young consume."

"Consume a fluid from a living body? Yech-h-h." The Captain covered his head with all three of his arms, calling the central supernumerary into use for the purpose, slipping it out of its sheath so rapidly as almost to knock Botax over.

"A three-armed, slimy, bug-eyed monster," said Marge.

"Yeah," said Charlie.

"All right you, just watch those eyes. Keep them to yourself."

"Listen, lady. I'm trying not to look."

Botax approached again. "Madam, would you remove the rest?"

Marge drew herself up as well as she could against the pionioning field. "Never!"

"I'll remove it, if you wish."

"Don't touch! For God's sake, don't touch. Look at the slime on him, will you? All right, I'll take it off." She was muttering under her breath and looking hotly in Charlie's direction as she did so.

NOTHING is happening," said the Captain, in deep dissatisfaction, "and this seems an imperfect specimen."

Botax felt the slur on his own efficiency. "I brought you two perfect specimens. What's wrong with the creature?"

"The bosom does not consist of globes or spheres. I know what globes or spheres are and in these pictures you have shown me, they are so depicted. Those are large globes. On this creature, though, what we have are nothing but small flaps of dry tissue. And they're discolored, too, partly."

"Nonsense," said Botax. "you must allow room for natural variation. I will put it to the creature herself."

He turned to Marge, "Madam, is your bosom imperfect?"

Marge's eyes opened wide and she struggled vainly for moments without doing anything more than gasp loudly. "*Really!*" she finally managed. "Maybe I'm no Gina Lollobrigida or Anita Ekberg, but I'm perfectly all right, thank you. Oh, boy, if my Ed were only here." She turned to Charlie. "Listen, you, you tell this bug-eyed slimy thing here, there ain't nothing wrong with my development."

"Lady," said Charlie, softly. "I ain't looking, remember?"

"Oh, sure, you ain't looking. You been peeking enough, so you might as well just open your crummy eyes and stick up for a lady, if you're the least bit of a gentleman, which you probably ain't."

"Well," said Charlie, looking sideways at Marge, who seized the opportunity to inhale and throw her shoulders back, "I

don't like to get mixed up in a kind of delicate matter like this, but you're all right,—I guess."

"You *guess*? You blind or something? I was once runner-up for Miss Brooklyn, in case you don't happen to know and where I missed out was on waist-line, *not* on—"

Charlie said, "All right, all right. They're fine. Honest." He nodded vigorously in Botax's direction. "They're okay. I ain't that much of an expert, you understand, but they're okay by me."

Marge relaxed.

Botax felt relieved. He turned to Garm. "The bigger form expresses interest, Captain. The stimulus is working. Now for the final step."

"And what is that?"

"There is no flash for it, Captain. Essentially, it consists of placing the speaking-and-eating apparatus of one against the equivalent apparatus of the other. I have made up a flash for the process, thus: kiss."

"Will nausea never cease?" groaned the Captain.

"It is the climax. In all the tales, after the skins are removed by force, they clasp each other with limbs and indulge madly in burning kisses, to translate as nearly as possible the phrase most frequently used. Here is one example, just one, taken at ran-

dom: 'He held the girl, his mouth avid on her lips.' "

"Maybe one creature was devouring the other," said the Captain.

"Not at all," said Botax impatiently. "Those were burning kisses."

"How do you mean, burning? Combustion takes place?"

"I don't think literally so. I imagine it is a way of expressing the fact that the temperature goes up. The higher the temperature, I suppose, the more successful the production of young. Now that the big form is properly stimulated, he need only place his mouth against hers to produce young. The young will not be produced without that step. It is the cooperation I have been speaking of."

"That's all? Just this—" The Captain's hands made motions of coming together, but he could not bear to put the thought into flash form.

"That's all," said Botax. "In none of the tales; not even in 'Recreationlad,' have I found a description of any further physical activity in connection with young-bearing. Sometimes after the kissing, they write a line of symbols like little stars, but I suppose that merely means more kissing; one kiss for each star, when they wish to produce a multitude of young."

"Just one, please, right now."

"Certainly, Captain."

Botax said with grave distinctness, "Sir, would you kiss the lady?"

Charlie said, "Listen, I can't move."

"I will free you, of course."

"The lady might not like it."

Marge glowered. "You bet your damn boots, I won't like it. You just stay away."

"I would like to, lady, but what do they do if I don't? Look, I don't want to get them mad. We can just—you know—make like a little peck."

She hesitated, seeing the justice of the caution. "All right. No funny stuff, though. I ain't in the habit of standing around like this in front of every Tom, Dick and Harry, you know."

"I know that, lady. It was none of my doing. You got to admit that."

Marge muttered angrily, "Regular slimy monsters. Must think they're some kind of gods or something, the way they order people around. Slime gods is what they are!"

Charlie approached her. "If it's okay now, lady." He made a vague motion as though to tip his hat. Then he put his hands awkwardly on her bare shoulders and leaned over in a gingerly pucker.

Marge's head stiffened so that lines appeared in her neck. Their lips met.



Captain Garm flashed fretfully. "I sense no rise in temperature." His heat-detecting tendrils had risen to full extension at the top of his head and remained quivering there.

"I don't either," said Botax, rather at a loss, "but we're doing it just as the space travel stories tell us to. I think his limbs should be more extended— Ah, like that. See, it's working."

Almost absently, Charlie's arm had slid around Marge's soft, nude torso. For a moment, Marge seemed to yield against him and then she suddenly writhed hard against the pinioning field that still held her with fair firmness.

"Let go." The words were muffled against the pressure of Charlie's lips. She bit suddenly, and Charlie leaped away with a wild cry, holding his lower lip, then looking at his fingers for blood.

"What's the idea, lady?" he demanded plaintively.

She said, "We agreed just a peck, is all. What were you starting there? What's going on around here? First these slimy creatures make like their gods and now this. You some kind of playboy or something?"

CAPTAIN GARM flashed rapid alternations of blue and yellow. "Is it done? How long do we wait now?"

"It seems to me it must hap-

pen at once. Throughout all the universe, when you have to bud, you bud, you know. There's no waiting."

"Yes? After thinking of the foul habits you have been describing, I don't think I'll ever bud again. —Please get this over with."

"Just a moment, Captain."

But the moments passed and the Captain's flashes turned slowly to a brooding orange, while Botax's nearly dimmed out altogether.

Botax finally asked hesitantly, "Pardon me, madam, but when will you bud?"

"When will I *what*?"

"Bear young?"

"I've got a kid."

"I mean bear young now."

"I should say not. I ain't ready for another kid yet."

"What? What?" demanded the Captain. "What's she saying?"

"It seems," said Botax, weakly, "she does not intend to have young at the moment."

The Captain's color patch blazed brightly. "Do you know what I think, Investigator? I think you have a sick, perverted mind. Nothing's happening to these creatures. There is no co-operation between them, and no young to be borne. I think they're two different species and that you're playing some kind of foolish game with me."

"But Captain—" said Botax.

"Don't 'but Captain' me," said Garm. "I've had enough. You've upset me, turned my stomach, nauseated me, disgusted me with the whole notion of budding and wasted my time. You're just looking for headlines and personal glory and I'll see to it that you don't get them. Get rid of these creatures now. Give that one its skins back and put them back where you found them. I ought to take the expense of maintaining Time-stasis all this time out of your salary."

"But, Captain—"

"Back, I say. Put them back in the same place and at the same instant of time. I want this planet untouched, and I'll see to it that it stays untouched." He cast one more furious glance at Botax. "One species, two forms, bosoms, kisses, cooperation, BAH— You are a fool, Investigator, a dolt as well and, most of all, a sick, sick, sick creature."

There was no arguing. Botax, limbs trembling, set about returning the creatures.

THEY stood there at the elevated station, looking around wildly. It was twilight over them, and the approaching train was just making itself known as a faint rumble in the distance.

Marge said, hesitantly, "Mister, did it really happen?"

Charlie nodded. "I remember it. Listen. I'm sorry you was em-

barrassed. It was none of my doing. I mean, you know, lady, you wasn't really bad. In fact, you looked good, but I was kind of embarrassed to say that."

She smiled. "It's all right."

"You want maybe to have a cup of coffee with me just to relax you. My wife, she's not really expecting me for a while."

"Oh? Well, Ed's out of town and my little boy is visiting at my mother's. I don't have to rush home."

"Come on, then. We been kind of introduced."

"I'll say." She laughed.

They had a couple of cocktails and then Charlie couldn't let her go home in the dark alone, so he saw her to her door. Marge was bound to invite him in for a few moments.

*

Meanwhile, back in the spaceship, the crushed Botax was making a final effort to prove his case. While Garm prepared the ship for departure Botax hastily set up the tight-beam visiscreen for a last look at his specimens. He focused in on Charlie and Marge in her apartment. His tendrils stiffened and he began flashing in a coruscating rainbow of colors.

"Captain Garm! Captain! "Look what they're doing now!"

But at that very instant the ship winked out of Time-stasis.

THE END

THE UNKNOWN

By WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

This story is like a box within a box.

***On the outside—terror and tragedy in
a setting of hair-trigger action.***

***On the inside, a quiet, illuminating tale
of gentleness, hope and faith.***

ONE of the things that go bump in the night went BUMP.

It must have been a big thing. Or Thing. It jolted me almost out of bed.

I'd been dreaming I was walking through the woods, gun under my arm, and somewhere among the maples was a red deer. Walking or shooting, or both, usually found their way into my dreams somehow. There were reasons.

This inexplicable concussion in the night was made part of the dream.

The trees somehow became mountains. This was the Kasserine Pass. I was asleep in my fox-hole when the counter-attack came. Its herald was the big shell bursting a few feet away and sending my rough walls tumbling in on me.

I fought and clawed to get my head above the avalanche. . . . And awoke fighting the bed clothes.

From somewhere out in the night came a long, superhuman shriek. It was deep winter and the ice on the lake was over a yard thick. Sometimes it breaks under its own increasing pressure, and a rift will run miles across it, howling just like a banshee.

But I knew that sound well. This blood-chilling shriek, echoing from the valley sides, was similar—but not the same. It was coming from quite another banshee.

It shut off abruptly.

The silence afterwards was as it must be on the airless moon. Thick snow muffles city noises but up in these empty northern latitudes, when winter has really



set in, the quiet becomes all pervading and tomblike.

I fumbled for and found the matches under the pillow. The heat was going from the room, and with stiff fingers it wasn't easy to light the oil lamp at the side of my bunk. I blinked at the shards of glass gliting on the blankets. The window beyond my white, dead feet had a hole blown in it.

It must have been forty below out there.

The window faced northward up the valley, but there was no moon and a mass of snow-cloud brooded over us. There was a thinning of it far to the north and I could just detect the faint, gauzy dance of the Borealis.

But more immediately the trees were only blurred shadows on the white blur of the snow, and the ice-gleam of the lake was reduced to a feeble phosphorescence.

It had stopped snowing, however.

There had been no further sound since the shriek, but the door opened and in came Johnny with a blanket wrapped around him. He slept in the other tiny bedroom in this cabin. When I needed him, I thumped on the floor with the butt of a Lee-Enfield rifle.

This time I had not summoned him.

"You okay, Cap?" he asked.

As always, his voice was soft and level, like a well-tended lawn.

"Yes, I'm all right, Johnny. But the darn bed-clothes have got kind of tangled—and the window's broken. Did any of the blast come your way?"

"Felt it hit the cabin. But there doesn't seem to be any major damage, far as I can tell. Can you see anything out there, Cap?"

"Not a thing. Haven't a notion what it was. Maybe a plane crash, but it didn't sound like it to me. Maybe one of those rocket satellite things fell back on us."

Johnny began tucking my blankets back. "One thing for sure—it was traveling faster than Mach One. You heard it coming down—after it hit."

He went to the window, felt the jagged hole carefully, paused, listening.

"Nothing seems to be moving out there," he said, presently.

He meant he could hear nothing moving, which was tantamount to saying that nothing was moving. For Johnny's hearing, like that of most blind men, was extremely acute.

I looked at my watch. "An hour yet till dawn. We'll sit it out. Make some coffee, Johnny."

He managed to prepare it and block up the window at much

the same time. Ex-sergeant John Bloom was good with his hands. He was pretty good at most things.

But he'd made two bad mistakes in his life.

One was marrying a girl after a week's acquaintance. You can't begin to get to know people in that time. When he was blinded and flown home, she came to see him once at the hospital, promised to come again—and never did. She vanished completely. Even the Army Pay Office couldn't locate her.

But I doubted if she ever went short of slices of soldiers' pay.

In imagination I could hear her Brooklyn slur: "Oh, *Johnny*—he's all washed up. A *wreck*. All his own damn fault, anyhow. He always was a mug."

I'd heard her say things as nasty. Her favorite catch-phrase was: "You gotta think about Number One some of the time."

Johnny's sole comment was: "You can't blame her."

He meant he couldn't. He couldn't blame anybody for anything. I told him he was too good for this world, which is as crass a statement as I ever made. This world happens to be short-stocked with good people. It can do with every one it's lucky enough to get.

Johnny's second mistake came in two parts, (1) treading on a

mine, (2) walking into the minefield in the first place.

(1) Was accidental. (2) Was deliberate. He came to pick me out of the minefield. I'd seen the warning strand of barbed wire, all right—it was the egg laid by a Messerschmitt which blew me yards beyond it. I was deafened and stumbled, and bruised to hell. But otherwise I was okay. As soon as I'd recovered my senses, I could probably have walked out of it.

But Johnny didn't wait. He walked in. He slung me over his shoulder and started to walk out. He trod on the triple prongs of a Kraut S-mine almost at once.

An S-mine was the creation of one of the not so good people in the world. It was packed with ball-bearings. Touched off by the prongs, an explosive charge lifted it chest-high in the air. And there it exploded properly. The ball-bearings could turn you into a human currant cake.

After the initial mistake. Johnny went through the right motions. He flung himself and me down so that most of the fragments would pass above us. They did.

I stopped only three of the balls, two with my backside and one with my spine. Johnny stopped only two, and those only with the fleshy parts of his thighs. But he had a bonus: a fragment of the casing passed

just behind his eyes, severing the optic nerves.

I never walked again. Johnny never saw again.

I had no family—my only brother was killed later in the Ardennes. Johnny left his parents and came and looked after me.

We'd been together for fifteen years now, twelve of them spent in this lakeside village in Maine. I had been born and reared in Maine. My face fitted there—it was long and lean, a Yankee face. When I left, I had always meant to come back to the forested hills, the peace rarely broken and then only by bird-songs, and distant guns, and the splash of a canoe paddle. Where the air was as crystal clear as the tumbling streams save for the rare blue stains of woodsmoke.

But I had never dreamed I should return as a helpless cripple.

I suppose it was a mistake to go back there. When from my window I saw the young men strike up through the birch grove on a bear hunt or wander down to the lake with their fishing tackle, the memories came back with an ache of longing. And the impotence made anger flame up in me. My self-control was coming apart at the seams. I had become a moody man.

The time of dawn came, but

the dawn itself lagged reluctantly behind. The clear patch in the north had been filled in by the steadily thickening snow-cloud which, combined with the screen of the valley-wall, strangled the sunlight at birth. Our surroundings remained obscure.

The outlook was almost as dark. More snow on top of what we'd had would make it tough indeed to clear the already blocked roads.

Waiting still for light, we washed and shaved and Johnny dressed. As always, he groomed himself as though he were about to step out on first parade. He used a cutthroat razor without ever nicking himself. Water never took the shine from his brown hair; his head was as sleek as a chestnut. His parting was a white, ruled line.

It was hard to accept that his clear gray eyes—not sunken, but healthy and so never removed—weren't observing everything, let alone anything.

Once in poor taste, I joked: "Own up, Johnny, you're faking, just for the pension."

He answered seriously: "*I do* see things, Cap—sort of in my mind's eye. It's queer. You know where things are when you know they're there, of course. But you also get a way of knowing things are there without anyone telling you. You can get it in a place you've never been to before."

He turned his head, listening. "Someone coming," he said.

I heard nothing until the knocking on the door, and then we had visitors. Aylott, who owned the sporting camp, and Barnes, who ran a chicken farm.

Barnes was a natural whiner, and he was whining now.

"I'll sue the Government. Blown half my sheds to hell, they have. Killed my best sitters. . . . Think there'll be any more trouble on account of that thing, Cap? Might it blow up again?"

"What thing?" I asked.

It was Aylott who answered, thrusting a thick forefinger at the window. "That."

I looked. Daylight was settling slowly like a precipitate from above. Some three hundred yards off, in the tree-less patch up the valley-side, I discerned dimly an unfamiliar shape. I reached for my field glasses and studied it.

It was a slatey gray, like the sky. Maybe fifteen feet high, ribbed like the dome of Florence Cathedral but tilted askew. Its outline was like half of an enormous hen's egg, with the flatter end buried deep under the snow.

A cracked egg, the glasses showed me. The fissures were fine and dark. The lines of ribbing were twisted away from symmetry.

"What d'you make of it, Cap'n?" asked Aylott, presently.

"I've never seen anything like it," I said. "But then, I've never seen a—" I fumbled for an example. "I've never seen an H-bomb."

Barnes sucked in breath sharply: "You think maybe they've dropped one, and it hasn't gone off?"

"I didn't say it was a bomb. Of course, it might be something that was dropped accidentally. But from the speed at which it came, I'd say it was fired—by rocket. Obviously it hasn't exploded. I don't think anything exploded. The damage was done by displaced air and concussion. We're seeing only part of the thing, anyhow — it's anyone's guess how much is buried.

"But do you think it's a bomb?" Aylott persisted.

"Good heavens, Aylott, how can anyone tell from here?" I said, peevishly, because I was eager to explore this novelty and yet frustrated by conditions. The thing was embedded on a slope too steep and difficult for the others to manhandle my sled up it. As usual, I was condemned to the spectator's role. I went on: "It might only be the broken-off tail of some new monster plane. The rest of the wreckage could be miles away."

"Like a cup of coffee?" asked Johnny, addressing our visitors.

"No, I've had one," said Aylott, irritably. His tone was so

untypical that I looked at him appraisingly. He avoided my eye.

Barnes licked his upper lip and said: "Sure, Johnny — thanks."

They were both frightened men.

This struck me as odd. The war had not touched them. Both had been exempted from service. Both ran one-man businesses. Aylott had a heart murmur. Barnes . . . well, no one knew much about Barnes. He was a hermit living among chickens.

No son of Center Dam had as much as set foot on the embarkation gangplank of a troopship. There had been no food shortages in this self-supporting community. The war had been as remote from Center Dam as an earthquake in Japan.

Perhaps that was why I'd chosen to end my days here. Not wholly consciously I reasoned that if the last war missed Center Dam, maybe the next one would also.

Although I'd been born way off in the eastern part of the State, and had never set eyes on Center Dam until after the war, I was yet a native of Maine. And it seemed queer to me that I had never been fully accepted or absorbed into this village. Nor Johnny either. For Maine folk are as hospitable as any in the world.

But to me it was obviously so.

Burly Jim Aylott's camp was always jam-packed with sportsmen in the season. He was ever the jovial host and the "sports" took him to their heart.

Yet even at his most genial on a Saturday night in the bar of the C.D. Hotel, bright-lit among its cluster of cabins, to me he still maintained a thin, transparent, but nevertheless solid wall of reserve. Like a glass screen. I could see him plainly through it, but I couldn't reach out and touch him.

I found the same screen between myself and others, too, always excepting Doc Nunn.

We weren't wholly welcome in Center Dam. Only now, watching these two locals, did I begin to sense the reason. We maimed creatures were a standing reminder of the lunatic world which lay beyond the walls of the sheltered valley. And of what that lunatic world could do to folk.

Also, maybe, we were a silent reproach to a community which, favored by chance and nature, had remained detached from the woes besetting civilization. I suppose, because the war had made no demands on them, they had come to think of it as none of their business.

But in their hearts they knew they were part of the common

fabric of humanity and could not tear themselves off from it. So they felt guilty. And the guilty expect to be punished. Maybe the next war wouldn't let them off so lightly.

The symbol of the next war was the H-bomb. Its herald, a rocket from the skies.

They were half expecting it, dreading it, and like fate it had come. Or something frighteningly like it.

Barnes held his coffee mug with both hands as he drank, and even so he spilled some of it.

Somebody thumped on the door. Johnny opened up. Dr. Nunn, aged and retired, teetered in. He walked awkwardly because of arthritic hip-joints, which often he cursed. (And as often I silenced a jealous inward voice which said: "Well, at least you *can* walk.")

He said: "Everyone's in a panic about that thing. I told 'em to keep away from it for the time being. Not that anyone's actually straining their gut to reach it. They keep asking me what it is. They're afraid it's a bomb. I'm afraid they may be right. What do you think about it Cap?"

I repeated that I'd seen nothing like it, but it could be a rocket missile that had gone astray.

"In which case," I added, "it'll have a dummy warhead. So there

should be no danger. Is the line still dead?"

The telephone line was a single strand wandering every which way through the woods, linking this trapper with that, one village with the next. In this area where sudden accident or illness might strike isolated men, folk had to keep in touch. Besides, the loneliness got you sometimes, and then it was a relief to ring someone up and exchange gossip. Or merely to eavesdrop on this party line—"rubbering on the line" we called it.

But late yesterday somewhere the link snapped. A rotten tree falling under its burden of snow, maybe. The weather had been too foul to go searching for the break. And now the single road running through the valley had been blocked by drifts at either end.

We were cut off from the world, except for the radio.

Dr. Nunn answered: "Yes, I near cranked the batteries flat trying to raise Forbes." (Forbes was the Game Warden.) "Wanted him to radio his HQ to contact the Army."

Johnny said: "The Army boys probably have a rough idea where it is—if they fired it. Radar tracking would have told them. They'll probably be along to collect it soon as the roads are clear."

Aylott exclaimed hoarsely: "Look! Quietly, out there!"

Barnes and the doctor joined him at the window, blocking my view. I asked them sharply to let me see. They moved aside silently. The black oblong of an open doorway had appeared in the gray dome. The door itself seemed to be hanging from twisted hinges, and a corner fragment had broken off, as though it had been hammered open.

I grabbed my field-glasses and trained them on the opening.

A white shape appeared therein and stood fumbling with something which looked like a short crowbar.

"A man in a space-suit," I reported. "That thing's no bomb. My gosh, at last they've succeeded in firing a man into space! He's come back with a bang, but he's come back alive. Aylott—you and Barnes go up there and lend him a hand. Johnny, make some more coffee—that guy'll be dying for some."

Aylott's face was relief itself. His normal cheerful grin returned. "Come on, Barnes, let's go make history—or at least get our names in the papers."

Barnes was relieved, too, and groused only mildly. "All the same, the government's gotta pay for the chickens."

They went.

Dr. Nunn asked: "Think that

feller's hurt at all? Maybe I'd better go get my little black bag out of the junk room."

"No, wait. I think he's okay."

The spaceman, as it would seem proper to call him, had dropped the thin, cylindrical object he'd been fooling with. It had fallen in the snow, and now he was gingerly lowering himself from the doorway after it. The space-suit seemed to be hampering his movements badly. I didn't wonder. Although ridged at the joints, it was plenty bulky.

The globular space-helmet was white, also, with a transparent aperture. The face behind I could see only indistinctly. It was darkish—either deeply tanned or else the man was colored. Why shouldn't a Negro be first into space, anyhow, if he were the fittest specimen for the job to be done.

The spaceman slid into the snow up to his thighs. Then he stood very still for a little while, as though adjusting himself to this uncertain renewal of contact with earth. Then he began fumbling slowly about in the snow around him.

I watched, and said suddenly:

"Doc, maybe I was wrong. He appears rather dazed. That crash might have given him a concussion."

"I'll have to bring my things here—I can't get up to him. Not

up that snow slope with these unworkable joints."

"Okay, Doc, Aylott and Barnes will get him here somehow. He may be glad of this bed. Go get your bag of tricks—and tell Johnny I want him, will you?"

Duly, Johnny came in from what served us as a kitchen.

"The chair, Johnny," I said, flinging back the bed-clothes.

He lifted me as though I were hollow, enfolded me in my dressing-gown, sat me in my wheelchair. I ran it over to the window.

Aylott and Barnes had come into the picture now, big, gross figures snow-shoeing it awkwardly up the white wave of snow.

They began to call and wave as they struggled up the slope. The spaceman showed no sign of having noticed them, and continued to fish around in the snow.

He found what he was seeking when the others had got within twenty feet of him. It was the thin, black cylinder. As he straightened up, he became aware of Aylott and Barnes. For a few seconds he stared at them. Then, almost casually, he pointed the cylinder at them.

With the hair-trigger reaction of a scared man, Aylott, in the lead, flung himself face-down. It was the slower Barnes who

caught the full force of the ray which leapt from the cylinder.

It must have felt like being struck by lightning.

I had a split-second glimpse of the ray. It was like a bar of plutonium at the moment of fission. Concentrated, eye-scorching light, intolerably effulgent—a brand plucked from the furnace of the sun itself.

Its glare, rebounding from the snow-sheeted landscape, seemed to beat up against the lowering cloud-layer and repel it by sheer light-pressure.

The three distant figures, the mysterious projectile, were blotted out by the all-pervading brightness which the field-glasses funneled, in twin jets like white-hot molten metal, straight into my eyes.

I dropped the glasses with a shout of agony.

Johnny was at my side within seconds. His exploratory fingers ran lightly over me. His cool hands came to rest over mine, which I was clasping to my seared eyes.

"What happened, Cap?"

I told him in breathless, tailless sentences. Tears of pain leaked between my fingers on to his.

"Poor Barnes! He got it worse than. . . . It may even have killed. . . . Johnny, warn everyone. Tell them to. . . no, they can't

get out of the valley. Tell them to lock themselves in their cabins, block their windows, not to look out. That murderous maniac may be alone—or there may be a whole crew like him in that thing."

"Okay, Cap." The touch of him went.

Soon I heard his voice, strong and clarion-clear, repeating my orders outside as though he were addressing morning parade.

Contemptibly, I almost hated him for being so completely in command of himself, while I, his erstwhile commanding officer, was huddled in panic. I was in real fear that now I was as blind as he, and I knew I couldn't accept it as he had.

I'd never accepted being a cripple. Hatred of my fate, shot through with spasms of self-pity, was always returning.

And now the possibility of blindness added to that. . . .

I clenched my teeth and forced myself to drop my hands. Then I opened my eyes slowly.

There was neither intense light nor blackness. The tear-ducts hadn't quite closed and I saw the bedroom through a swimmy gray mist with a black bar, like a huge hyphen, superimposed on the scene whichever way I looked. But—I *saw*. And the bar was slowly fading: it was only the counter-image of the super-bright ray.

The relief was like a shot of benzedrine.

I looked blearily at the slope of the valley—my glasses were still somewhere on the floor. The projectile was there, unchanged. The spaceman had progressed a few yards down the slope, towards the village, and now stood knee-deep in snow turning his head this way and that, as though undecided where to go. He was still holding the ray-gun, but slackly, at his side.

Near the foot of the slope, floundering back along the trail they'd made, were Aylott and Barnes. Barnes was sobbing—I could hear him faintly. His head was lowered and he was holding a hand to his face. Aylott, apparently unharmed, had one arm around Barnes and was helping him along.

They passed from the frame of my view.

I called Johnny. He came at once.

"Is there any sign of Doctor Nunn?"

"He's trying to get to them. He told me they were coming back. Can you see all right now, Cap?"

"Well enough," I said grimly. "Give me that rifle. And a clip of shells."

For once he hesitated. Then he did as I'd asked. I slipped off the magazine pressed the five .303

shells into it, one by one, against the pressure of its spring, and jammed the magazine back on. I yanked back the bolt and rammed a round up the spout. I slid the marker along the scale, setting the sights at 300 yards.

A couple of thrusts with the butt drove Johnny's temporary window patch out into the snow. Chill air seeped in. I poked the barrel through the open square, rested it on the window frame, thumbed over the safety catch.

I tucked the butt into my shoulder, began to take aim. A hand stole past my face, fumbled, pushed the safety catch on. I looked round with almost a snarl. "Johnny, what the hell—"

"Take it easy, Cap. Cover him but hold your fire. We don't know who he is or what it's all about yet. The guy might be dazed. Maybe he imagined he was being attacked and fired automatically in self-defense."

I swallowed. My hands were trembling with anger. I couldn't have hit the projectile, let alone the unknown spaceman. I tried to calm myself.

"That thing he fired, Johnny, wasn't a weapon known in the Pentagon. *Ergo*, it's a foreign secret weapon. And he's probably a member of an invading army — rocket-borne. A *blitzkrieg* by rocket—for all we know, thousands of projectiles

like that have landed. Invasion by barges is a bit out of date, you know."

Johnny was skeptical. "Who would launch an attack in mid-winter and bog its army down in snow like this? Anyhow, if there were others the radio would have been yelling its head off. I've been speaking to folk out there who've been keeping their radios on. Everything seems to be perfectly normal."

"You think this guy's on his own?"

"Yes, Cap, I do. Furthermore—"

He broke off, his keen ear catching some sound, and went swiftly from the room. Soon he returned with Aylott. They were carrying an unconscious Barnes between them. Dr. Nunn hobbled behind with his black bag.

Barnes' face was a mess. Swollen white blisters covered it, and little shreds of skin were peeling off.

"On the bunk," I said, and they laid him there.

Dr. Nunn said: "I've doped him with morphia. He's out of pain—for the present. The burns aren't so bad as they look. It's his eyes I'm worried about. Wish I'd kept my ophthalmoscope. Curse this weather—he ought to be rushed to the hospital."

He opened his bag, produced bottles and bandages, began to treat Barnes' face.

Aylott looked at me. The geniality was still missing but also missing now was fear. His face was grave, his eyes steady.

"You could have beaten it right away, and left Barnes to it," I said. "By burdening yourself with him, you risked sharing his fate."

He shrugged. "What else can you do, when it comes to it?"

The coming of the spaceman had settled a vital question for him, which the war had not. No man can foretell what he'll do "when it comes to it." Aylott had proved his courage. Now he was at peace with himself.

His gaze dropped to my rifle, traveled to its likely target.

"If you shoot him, Captain, the scientists will never forgive you. I'm pretty sure we're seeing our first visitor from another planet."

I stared at him. He didn't seem to be kidding.

Johnny said: "I'd suspected that, too."

I looked from one to the other of them, then asked Aylott: "What makes you so sure? You couldn't have more than glimpsed his face."

"A glimpse was enough. His complexion is dark green. He has no nose to speak of—just a single orifice. His mouth is lipless—it's just a wide slit in his face. His eyes are queer—they

slope down to the outer corners. Makes him look kind of sad. But they're bright eyes—intelligent."

"Well, at least he can see out of them," I said, bitterly. "I doubt if Barnes will ever see again."

Dr. Nunn, busy at the bed, sighed. "Guess you're right, Cap. The scarred corneas might be replaced, but I think the damage runs deeper than that."

I bit my lips and scowled at the unknown, who was still standing on the slope looking aimless.

I said: "If he starts coming this way, he'll have had it. So will the scientists. They'll have to make do with a dead specimen. Better a dead Martian than another blinded and burnt human—there are children in Central Dam, I'll remind you."

At which moment the unknown made up his mind. He resumed his slow advance down the slope.

I flicked the safety catch and raised my gun. I was ready for him.

"Leave him to me, Cap," said Johnny urgently. "I'll stop him. He can't blind me."

I paused irresolutely, and Johnny was gone.

"The fool!" I said, savagely. "He'll get burnt. Stop him, Aylott."

"Only if you promise not to shoot," said Aylott, firmly.

"Don't argue, man. . . . Okay, I promise. For the time being."

Aylott hurried out after Johnny, I waited impatiently for their return. Dr. Nunn quietly finished his work on Barnes. The unconscious man's head was covered with gauze and bandages, and a thick cottonwool pad was bound over his eyes.

"Well, that's the best I can do," said Nunn.

Boorishly, I didn't answer. I was on edge for Johnny's return. How much of my concern was for him, how much for myself without him, I shouldn't care to apportion.

When at last I saw him again, he was advancing steadily up the valley-side in the rough path that had been made. Aylott was a pace behind him, and maintaining that pace. The grotesquely padded alien was moving cautiously down the same path, gun in hand. The meeting was inevitable.

I swore aloud. Nunn looked over my shoulder at the scene.

"I might have known Johnny would talk Aylott round," I said, sourly. "Johnny always gets his own way."

"Let's hope he can talk the stranger round, then," said Nunn, and tut-tutted. "Incredibly foolish, going up there without any protection at all. Even a wet towel wrapped around the face, and sun-glasses . . . I hope

I shan't have to do that nasty job over again. Haven't the stuff—or the heart for it."

"You won't," I promised, and took careful aim. I had promised not to shoot if Aylott brought Johnny back. He had failed to, I was free to make another promise—this time, to shoot.

My sights were trained on where the unknown's heart should be, if he were just that much human. But I was also watching his gun arm. If that begin to lift. . . .

It did, when Johnny and Aylott were only a few yards off.

I fired.

Just as I squeezed the trigger, the unknown slipped on the snow slope and veered sideways. I hit him, all the same. The impact bowled him over. The big white shape disappeared under the general whiteness.

Johnny spun around and raised his arm imperatively in the "hold your fire" signal. Then he and Aylott hurried forward and all but disappeared, too, as they investigated the fallen figure.

"Right on the nose, Cap," said Nunn, patting my shoulder. "You did the right thing."

"I saved them from a roasting."

"Of course."

Why, then, did I feel uneasy, almost guilty?

Slowly, three figures became

erect on the slope. The alien was in the middle. Aylott had secured the gun. Johnny was grasping the alien's arm, not as though he were about to frog-march him, but in a friendly kind of way. Aylott began to gesture, using the gun as a pointer. The alien gestured also, Aylott investigated something on the alien's back. Johnny began doing something there, too.

After a minute or so, Aylott pointed to the projectile, made as if to go to it. The alien pulled him back gently.

More sign language followed.

"What the hell's going on?" I said, feeling gloomy and out of it. "Hand me up those field-glasses, Doc."

As soon as I began to refocus, the little party started down the path together, the unknown still in the center and seemingly being guided by the other two. They passed from view.

I turned my chair from the window and looked at the doctor questioningly. "So now we're all pals together. I don't get it."

He rubbed his chin, looking away. "The blind leading the blind," he mumbled, cryptically, and weaved his painful way to Barnes and began to take his pulse.

The coin dropped. "You mean, that other-world creature is blind?"

"Not quite," said Nunn, ab-

sently. He was thinking of something else. "Barnes will be coming out of it soon. That was the last of my morphia. It's not going to be a joyful awakening."

I banged the arm of my chair with frustration. "What *can* we do? If I could only walk! I feel so helpless."

"We're all helpless right now," said Nunn.

Presently, Aylott and Johnny led the alien in. In his thick-white suit he looked enormous in this small room. His face was as Aylott had described it, except that his curiously slanting eyes were half-closed and no longer bright.

"Where did it hit him?" I asked.

They ignored me. Aylott looked distressed. He grabbed the doctor's arm.

"Doc, can you help? This poor devil's suffocating. The captain shot two holes in the air-tank pack on his back. We've plugged them with our handkerchiefs, but most of the stuff escaped first. He has little more than is left in his suit. It won't last long. But we don't know what the stuff is. It's not our kind of air."

"It smells like almonds," said Johnny. He had gently eased the big figure into the chair by the stove. The contrast made the chair look like a child's.

"So does prussic acid gas," said Nunn, looking worried. "But surely it can't be that." He went behind the chair, sniffing at the air-tank on its harness. He coughed suddenly and violently. "Can't identify it," he choked. "But I guess . . . enough of it . . . would kill us."

Anxious to avoid condemnation as a murderer in their eyes, I said: "There must be reserve tanks in his ship, maybe whole compartments—"

"No," said Aylott, sharply and with hostility "The ship's all smashed up inside. When you get close enough, you can see it's falling apart."

"All the same—"

"No. He indicated clearly enough by signs that there was no hope there. It's a broken shell. It was a crash landing. He was alone."

"Then he was doomed, anyhow," I claimed. "You can't blame me."

"Nobody's blaming you," said Aylott. "Can we forget you for just a little while and think of him?"

"All right, all right. Here's my pen. There's a writing pad on that table. Get him to write down the formula of his atmosphere. The doc's still got plenty of chemicals and apparatus. There's chance he could whip up something that'll last your friend

till we can contact civilization again and get the stuff laboratory-produced. It's worth trying."

Dr. Nunn looked doubtful. Aylott wavered. "We'll never understand his chemical symbols."

"Okay, you say he's intelligent," I said. "Maybe intelligent enough to draw rough diagrams of atomic structures, the component elements. One dot, with another dot circling it, for hydrogen. One dot, two dots circling it—helium. And so on. Get it? I know something about it. Could be I could fathom it out."

"Maybe it would be simpler to take him to my place and let him look over my stock," said Dr. Nunn.

Johnny said: "That's a mile away, Doc. He'd use up too much energy struggling that distance through the snow, have to breathe too hard. It'd likely kill him."

"Anyhow, Doc, he couldn't look over your stock," said Aylott. "It's become obvious to us that he can see little more than dim outlines. He must come from a planet where the daylight is extremely bright. Earth to him seems as dark as Pluto would to us."

"Then for Pete's sake why did he land here?" I asked.

"I doubt if he meant to," said Aylott. "More likely he meant to orbit Earth, and take a quick

survey, but something went wrong and he crashed. Skip that for now. What can we do to help? Maybe there's something in your idea, Captain, but if the poor guy can't see what he's doing—"

"The torch," said Johnny, suddenly.

Aylott banged a fist into his palm. "Sure, the torch. Let's try it."

He picked up the ray-gun he'd laid on the table, and examined a stud on its side. "This isn't meant to be a weapon. It's only a torch—providing the kind of light *he* needs. It's blinding to us. He saw that—too late. He was scared to use it again. He chose to grope on through the dark and the unknown. That's the sort of guy he is."

I looked away, and felt depressed. I saw my gun leaning against the wall by the window. I felt like smashing it.

Aylott went on: "This stud was bent and jammed in the crash. He was working on it, then it dropped in the snow. He located it and got it straight just as we came on the scene. He only wanted to see who or what we were."

There was a faint moan from the bunk. Barnes was stirring. Nunn went to his side, made soothing sounds.

I looked at the alien, motion-

less and in discomfort in the chair. His eyes were open wider but there wasn't much life in them. His thin mouth was parted. His tongue looked brown and dry. He was gasping.

"Give me that pad," I said. Aylott passed it. I drew a few simple atoms in progressive series, was stumped for some symbol to represent the atmosphere, then decided on a sketch purporting to be a cloud of gas. Beside it I set a useless query mark.

"Give it to him."

Aylott pressed pad and pen into the alien's thickly gauntleted hands. The fingers closed on them. The eyes moved, looked down blindly.

I wheeled myself to the window, opened it wide and got away from it.

"Aaah!" came from Barnes.

I said: "Aylott, direct that torch out of the window, else we'll burn the joint down. We'll have to gamble he can see enough by reflected light from the snow. You can stay if you want, Johnny. Doc, you'd better wait in the other room. We can't risk your eyes."

"I'm staying with Barnes," said Nunn. He crouched over the slowly awakening man, shielding him with his slight twisted body and pulling the blankets further over him. I was satisfied that Barnes' eyes would be protected

from further harm by the thick, cottonwool pad.

"Very well, Doc, but keep your back turned and your eyes shut. Aylott, you'll find some dark glasses in that drawer. Put them on—and keep your eyes tightly shut while the thing's working."

I turned my chair away from him. "Count slowly up to five," I went on. "Switch on at five. Give him around three minutes. Tell us when you switch off."

"Right," said Aylott. "You set, Johnny? Keep facing that way. Here we go. One, two, three . . ."

I shut my eyes and buried my head in my arms.

". . . four, five."

Nothing could be heard except weak, inarticulate cries from Barnes. But I felt warmth on the back of my neck, warmth that became radiant heat.

The seconds dragged on. There came tiny sounds of movement and then paper rustling.

My neck felt as though it were blistering. I wanted to shield it with my hands, but it would be stupid to uncover my face.

Eternity went on, marked only by intervals between Barnes' moans. The paper had ceased rustling. I had an uncanny feeling that I was being watched intently. There were mad thoughts crossing my mind. Suppose the alien was faking? Now he had

us all with our back to him and our eyes shut. Suppose, seeing that, he went berserk and—

There was a small, floppy thud. The pad had fallen to the floor.

"It's off now!" snapped Aylott.

Like a tortoise, I put forth my head, turned it. The alien lay back, the pad at his feet, the pen lost somewhere. His eyes were closed. His face was very dark now, nearly black with congestion.

I rued my uncharitable suspicions. In near despair I said: "There won't be time enough."

Aylott pounced on the pad, frowned at it, thrust it at me. Set beside my little protons, and electrons in orbit, was a single larger system of orbits, shakily drawn.

Nine orbits. The solar system. Either the alien had misunderstood my intention or else realized that a full answer was beyond his resources now. Or beyond ours.

But he had succeeded in getting one message across. There was a simple cross marked in the orbit nearest the sun.

"Mercury," I said. "He comes from Mercury."

That explained the intense sunlight he was accustomed to. Also his slow movements under our gravitation. But it left a lot more unexplained, which to us would have to remain forever unknown.

"Doctor," called Aylott, peering intently through the faceplate. "Come quick—I think he's going."

Dr. Nunn hobbled across and gave his verdict. "Very soon now, I'm afraid. Suffocation."

We looked, horrified and helpless, at the strange being dying before our eyes, far from his world, far from our understanding. Except Johnny, that is. He'd begun to feel around the Mercurian's neck and shoulders, sliding little studs.

"Johnny's right—take his helmet off," I said, thickly. "It's the last gamble left. Our atmosphere is probably useless to him but it can hardly be worse than nothing."

Aylott was already helping Johnny. All at once the helmet came off in their hands. They lifted it free. It was like opening a furnace door. Cooking hot gases boiled out into the room with a raw, sharp smell of almonds.

We all began coughing and our eyes streamed water.

Luckily, the window was still wide open, and much of the expanding gas went pressing out to freedom.

Then a miracle happened. Because of my smarting eyes and convulsions of coughing, I glimpsed it only intermittently.

The Mercurian's strange eyes

opened wide. His face paled. He stood up slowly, his mouth still agape in that nightmare face. His hands touched his wrists and gauntlets fell silently to the floor.

His naked green hands were surprisingly thin and delicate. His fingers were pointed and without nails.

He groped around him. His left hand brushed Johnny's cheek, returned, touched it properly.

And Johnny covered his eyes with his hands and began to tremble.

The Mercurian moved forward, towards me. I bent double as another bout of coughing racked my chest. Burning fingers touched the sore place at the back of my neck. The touch was withdrawn and the pain went with it. All pain.

I sat up in speechless awe, and tremors began to run through me. Through my whole body. Through my legs, to my feet. I could feel my feet.

The Mercurian could not see where to turn next. A pale shaken Johnny came up behind him and began to guide him gently. For Johnny could see now.

Johnny led him past the astounded Aylott to Dr. Nunn, who was sitting petrified on the edge of the bunk. The Mercurian extended his left arm.

"Take his hand, Doctor," Johnny whispered.

Dazedly, Nunn did so. The tired stoop, the twisted awkwardness of his limbs, disappeared. He was made straight and whole. As long as I live, I shall never forget the expression on the face of the healer as he himself was healed.

The Mercurian, his face now all agony, as though he had absorbed all the pain he had removed, bent forward, groping along the bunk, feeling the shape of the groaning Barnes. He laid his palm on Barnes' head like a benediction. The groaning ceased.

The Mercurian straightened up and stood stock-still for a moment.

Then with a sound in his throat like the slow tearing of cloth, he fell forward across the bunk and its occupant.

I was helping to lift him before I even realized I was on my feet again. And beside me Nunn was helping, too, strong and lithe for all his age.

We laid the stranger gently on his back on the floor. Death had been delayed but not cheated. I closed his queer eyes. His skin was silk-smooth and still very warm. But by the standards of his world he was cold—ice-cold.

Barnes sat up suddenly, plucking at his bandages.

He protested, whiningly:

"What sort of game are you playin' on me? Who was that jumpin' about on me? What's the idea of blindfoldin' me? Get this stuff off—let me see, will-ya?"

"Take it easy, Barnes, you're all right," said Nunn, unbandaging him expertly.

As the pad came away, we saw that Barnes' skin was clear, unmarked, and his mean little eyes were alive with indignation.

Aylott said, uncertainly: "I was never a religious man. But now . . . I don't know."

Johnny said in an undertone: "He saved others but couldn't save himself."

Barnes stared at us, indignation passing into puzzlement.

"Who—me? What are you talkin' about? What's been goin' on here?"

I said: "He didn't waste much time scribbling on that damn—fool pad. He was studying us, seeing our troubles. I felt him watching."

"So did I," said Johnny.

Dr. Nunn flexed his knee, straightened it again, with quiet content. He gave a little sigh of happiness, and said: "Gosh, it's great to feel really fit again. You know, I never wholly scoffed at the so-called miracle cures. Ever read Alexis Carrel? He examined some of those cases—hopeless cases. And then saw the cures

happen before his eyes. And he was no sucker—he was a Nobel Prize man, for medical research. Psycho-somatics is stumbling along the same path. From what we've seen, we've got to accept it now: sudden organic changes to nerves and muscle and bone are possible."

"Unfortunately, our friend seemed unable to do anything with inorganic chemicals," I said. "It seems plain idiotic that he had to die of suffocation. But he fought to the end. That last effort of his was magnificent."

"The triumph of the spirit," said Aylott. "I'm glad he came. It's done something for my spirit."

There was a little shriek. Barnes, who had been looking up at us, listening with his mouth open, had happened to look down and see the strange, still form on the floor.

"Gosh, who's that?"

"That," said Dr. Nunn, "is something we can't tell you, Barnes. I only wish we could. We humans tend to get big-headed about our scientific advances. The conquest of matter, the con-

quest of space, and the rest of it. Then something like this happens and we're reminded of the real scale of things. We're on a tiny island in an infinite sea. And in that sea are countless other islands, larger, maybe, or smaller—but all unknown."

That was two years ago.

I wouldn't say man's knowledge has increased all that much in the interim.

For myself, I left Maine and the impossible wish to return to boyhood. I went back into business in the immense dog-fight called Los Angeles. It's a one-man business. Literally and figuratively I stand on my own feet.

When Johnny's sight returned, he wanted to use his eyes. He went looking. For her. I've not heard yet whether he's found her. I still wonder whether she'll be worth the finding. Maybe he saw some good in her that I never did. I just don't know. As Nunn said, there's a great many things we don't know. About other people. About ourselves. About other souls on other planets.

THE END

OPERATION LUNACY

By LESTER DEL REY

Here is a mercilessly pragmatic appraisal of the "merciful armaments" our laboratories are stockpiling, and a question to ponder about weapons and morality.

IT SEEMS probable that some day in the near future mankind may get rid of the only deterrent to major war ever developed and return to our normal routine of horror, loot, rapine and conquest. We've already stockpiled the potential for such atrocities under the name of "merciful" armaments and we're trying to develop others.

The deterrent to war, of course, is our supply—and our opponent's supply—of A-bombs, H-bombs and possibly Cobalt-bombs. So long as such things are in existence and there is a chance of missiles to deliver them, the military business of war is virtually impossible.

This isn't the civilian idea of the bombs, to be sure. The aver-

age civilian thinks of an H-bomb as the most powerful weapon ever developed. Nothing could be further from the truth, however. Nuclear bombs are almost worthless for warfare, and they have made the conduct of any military operation so dangerous and unpopular that it is temporarily totally impractical.

To a well-schooled military mind, the nuclear bomb has no place in the scheme of warfare. Wars are fought for several purposes. One is to gain territory, which is pointless when all the assets of the bomb-won land are destroyed and the salient points of the territory are too radioactive for occupation for generations. Another aim of war is the taking over of other peoples to

increase one's own might as a world power, or to become the only power. This cannot be done by a destructive means so thorough that no organized population can remain. (Meantime, unfortunately, there is always the danger that some fool underling will somehow trigger such a holocaust.)

That's why some of our best military minds are working overtime on both sides of the ocean to find a mutually-agreeable means of disarming the bombs and disposing of their nuclear dynamite. Unless some deplorable accident happens in the near future, it's a pretty certain guess that they'll be able to rid the world of the chance of nuclear warfare.

And at the moment that earth's last A-bomb is scuttled, the last horrible threat great enough to prevent deliberate worldwide warfare will be gone.

THE CHANCES FOR WAR

HISTORY is full of weapons so horrible as to make war "impossible," such as gunpowder, gas and the tank. A "classic" story of science fiction thirty years ago used monstrous tanks, planes and poison gases to paint almost the same picture of the final war as those imagined as a result of the nuclear forces. But only a few people ever believed

that such weapons would reach through the military ranks and hit *them*. (Only civilians or soldiers in civilian posts of power make war; military men merely *wage* it.) But science has been able to draw such a true and convincing sketch of the invisible demons of radiation that much of the civilian population now is too aware of the dangers to permit major war while such weapons remain as a threat. For the first time in history, war is impossible except by madness or accident.

So we'll get rid of the nuclear bombs. But we won't thus get rid of our chance to make war. We've already been farsighted enough—as have other countries—to develop weapons of other kinds but of equal horror. We've even bragged about how well we've succeeded in this. For the past ten years, countless magazine articles have appeared telling of our development of bacteriological or germ warfare and of horrendous nerve gases that can subdue whole nations overnight.

Recently, the Army announced that it had such a large and varied stock of effective nerve gases in its stockpile that it was halting production. When a military branch makes that decision, it means they have far more than enough!

Of course, whenever such weapons are mentioned, there is

a cry that men are too moral to use them. We didn't use gas in World War II, after all, nor in Korea. We didn't use nuclear bombs in Korea, either. I suspect that most people are a little uncertain about everyone's being too moral to drop the H-bomb; after all, *we* dropped two A-bombs on civilian populations. But once some measure of nuclear disarmament has been reached, the "too moral" argument will be brought up about that, too.

The idea of mentioning the word "moral" in the same sentence with nerve gas is so appalling that even Satan must retch. There is no morality even thinkable when such weapons are developed. Calling them "merciful" weapons is precisely like referring to a "clean" bomb, which still releases Carbon-14 with far more lingering and deadly effects than Strontium-90, as our own Senate stated.

MORALITY AND WEAPONS

WE are, however, far too moral about using weapons which are of no military usefulness whatever.

Poison gas, of the World War I type, was a brutal and sometimes effective weapon. It might have been more effective had the airplane been able to drop

it massively on civilians. But World War I was a typical war, where the defense for a long time was developed beyond the offensive powers. It was a static warfare in trenches. In the few cases where gas was used in troop movements, it later proved to be more damaging to the side using it than to the enemy. It remained too long, and ruined future operations.

By the time World War II came along, effective gas masks had been stockpiled so well that the use of gas was ridiculous. For the same effort in use, other weapons were far more effective. Bombs against factories and rail centers meant more than gassing civilians. So we didn't use gas, though Japan did in China, where conditions were different.

We'll probably always remain too moral to use bacterial warfare, also, but for an even better reason. There simply is no really useful form of germ in existence or which we have been able to mutate which will do enough damage to others without boomeranging on ourselves to make using it worthwhile.

Bacteria—or germs or even viruses—can be mutated into all kinds of variations, of course. This can be done by radiation, by changing environments, or by transplanting a bit of cell

nucleus from one creature to another. (This substance, known as DNA, is the basic material out of which cell structure and heredity are shaped.)

Like most mutations, however, only a certain number prove sufficiently viable and useful. Some lose the power to metabolize food. Others fail to divide into new cells. All kinds of things happen. Some do fine in the laboratory and die on human skin or in fresh water. Sunlight is lethal to many; others require an atmosphere free of oxygen.

Of those that manage to survive, most aren't aggressive enough. Either the cell must look on man (or some foodstuff of man's) as a host, or it must create a poison he can't tolerate. It must also spread so readily that it will attack most of the population.

Well, such germs have been developed—or viruses with similar powers. And lo and behold, they turn out to be pretty much standard diseases, already known, such as a variant of influenza. Nature has been mutating such cells over and over again day in and day out, during the long years of mankind's development. And out of the countless possibilities, the strongest and most dangerous have been the ones obviously most likely to succeed. If the disease is viable enough to make it suitable for an

attack on man, it has probably been in business attacking man for a million years!

But somehow, without sanitation or antibiotics, man managed to survive. Most of the population lived through the bubonic plague and survived cholera during the ignorance of medieval times. Even syphilis, apparently imported from America to Europe, failed to ruin the race; in time, the disease seemed to grow tired and far more mild than it had been at first—which meant man built up a resistance to it.

THE LAST IMMUNITY

THOSE without resistance to such bugs died off somewhere between one million BC and now; those who survived passed on their resistance, from father to son. And man has one final line of defense against even some new variation—or one which has vanished for a few generations, but now remutates, such as some influenza.

Man's blood can perform a delicate chemical analysis on the invading poisons and create antibodies. These new cells or substances act much like little caps on threaded pipe; they're tailored to mate the "screw" pattern of the dangerous molecule and plug it up with a totally useless end. Often, the body passes this immunity to future generations.

Nothing could have been much more fiendish than the influenza following the first War. It created havoc. But had it occurred in a country in danger of invasion, the havoc would have been fitted into place without seriously jeopardizing the fighting ability of our nation.

The favorite product mentioned for germ warfare is the poison which is responsible for botulism. But the organism producing this highly deadly poison simply isn't able to cope with the normal environment in large enough quantity to serve as a weapon. Nor is the poison itself so stable that it would not be possible to treat water in ways to destroy it without too much difficulty.

Civilians get very moral about using a weapon which serves no purpose. Military men are less self-deceptive; they simply decide its use is not expedient, except when writing press releases. Also, when a weapon has been worked on for twenty years, with countless stories in the papers and with perhaps some propaganda value as a terror inspiration among other nations, no military man is going to be so foolish as to proclaim his failure to make it work. There will be no announcement saying germ warfare is impossible. It just won't become expedient!

On the other hand, morality

never seems to stand in the way of using any weapon which has a tactical—rather than a terror—advantage. Flame throwers are pretty grim and ugly weapons when turned on a man. We used them. Against a city of paper and bamboo like Tokyo, incendiary bombs are horrendous. We dropped them on the only raid we had sense enough to make during the early part of the war with Japan. For that matter, we dropped two of the nuclear horror weapons on that same Japan, without making too great an effort to pick a military target. We dropped the bombs because we would not accept Japan's surrender on condition she retain Hirohito as emperor; then we finally accepted surrender on just such a condition, though calling it unconditional.

In all fairness, however, it should be pointed out that dropping the bomb was a civilian decision. Perhaps the two billion dollars spent developing the weapon needed justification to a civilian Congress. But that doesn't matter, since most great military decisions today are directed ultimately by civilians.

Nerve gas is an entirely different matter. We have it, without any doubt. We've got immense amounts of it, we know it works, and we have excellent facilities for its use. Or rather, we've got them, since there are

many different forms of nerve gases, with many different effects.

NERVE GAS FACTS

THESE are not properly gases at all, in the true meaning of the term. They're aerosol mists, like the vapor that comes out of a pressure can of bug spray. In fact, we might say that the first effective nerve gas was an aerosol mist of DDT, since that acted on the nerves of many forms of insects. Any good military man watching the use of a bug bomb must have dreamed of something like it to use against human enemies. From wish to fact was a fairly short step.

The advantage of the aerosol mist over a true gas is a very great one. In the first place, almost any finely pulverized solid can be suspended in such a mist, as can any liquid which will spray out in fine enough a form. The action of spraying it out by means of a pressurized volatile substance such as the freons then leaves the particles suspended like dust motes in the air, where they may remain for days or weeks.

Just as an example of how simple such a weapon could be, you might imagine suspending ragweed pollen and spraying it in a concentration greater than any occurring naturally! Of

course, this wouldn't be a good weapon, since it only attacks a small percentage of the population; but for the susceptible, it would be totally incapacitating.

The first of such "gas" substances actually developed was almost as crude. It was a substance which acted by paralyzing the victim. A number of journals published the details on this, since it was not kept secret; an antidote that could be carried around by everyone was quickly discovered, making this gas almost useless.

That gas of a decade ago was what might have been called a merciful weapon. It was reasonably painless—aside from the fear and horror as a man realized he was being hit by it. It could knock out a population without killing too many, provided medical care was given within a reasonable time. If the antidote hadn't been so easily guessed, it might have become an excellent weapon.

But after that, science reached back into the unknown to come up with pure black magic, in all its ugliest manifestations. From here on, the story stops reading like science fiction and reads like the nightmares of a wizard at the Sabbat! The source of the new knowledge was as unlikely as a true wizard would have been, since the discovery was made by psychiatrists.

Decades ago, Freud had made one of his rare contributions of true insight when he suggested that insanity might have a chemical basis in the body. Now suddenly, a chemical was found which could produce the symptoms of schizophrenia. This was lysergic acid, as reported in the papers. The volunteers who took it developed the symptoms of true temporary insanity. The use of a chemical could induce a psychotic state directly! Other drugs also turned out to have the power, such as serotonin. How many different drugs have been found is largely secret, but they produce all types of equally horrendous reactions.

Here was the substance for a perfect weapon.

By definition, the perfect weapon shouldn't kill. A corpse is far less trouble to the enemy than even a wounded man. A man who has gone insane would be better than a normal casualty, since he would foul up the actions of many others. A perfect weapon should also do no damage to enemy harbors, forts, weapons, plants, etc. It should wipe out all effective resistance, but it should destroy nothing of value to the conquerors. Ideally, it should so dishearten the enemy that they would accept conquest and never consider the possibility of resistance after their recovery.

HERE in the insanity-producing (or nerve attacking) substances there was the potential of just such a weapon. Military men had speculated on it for years, and considered its requirements so mutually contradictory that it was impossible. Now, out of almost arcane dabbings into men's minds had come the ideal instrument!

The rest is clouded in bits of secrecy. Nobody is going to say precisely what has been done, or what chemicals are used. But the psychologists and psychiatrists who had a hand in creating it couldn't be kept out of things entirely, and they needed some of the stuff to study what drives men mad and how to treat insanity without the doubtful and slow art of analysis. The propagandists have also been given tiny bits of the results obtained, just to keep the other side worried.

One series of pictures was proof enough. The first few frames showed a cat in a cage. A mouse was introduced. The cat moved with beautiful precision, speared the mouse, and proceeded about proper feline business. The next sequence was after—quite a while after—the cat had received a mild gas treatment. Again the cat is in the cage, looking confused. Enter

mouse. Cat promptly backs into the furthest corner of the cage, arching its back, baring its teeth and looking like the cat who discovered the world's largest and meanest dog. Eventually the mouse gets used to things and wanders toward the cat. Thereupon, the cat leaps frantically for another corner and goes into convulsions from fear!

This is a series of pictures widely released, and probably represents one of the minor achievements in designing nerve gases!

We were hardly too moral to develop such a gas, it seems. Oh, of course the military branches aren't supposed to be moral—they simply execute the final failure of diplomacy, as the saying goes about war. But I seem to recall that the civilian papers were delighted at our development. And none of the citizens to whom I pointed out the pictures expressed anything but admiration for our cleverness. Good old moral us were now ready to use this stuff to put an end to the immoralities of bad old them!

Merely paralyzing a whole population from planes spraying aerosol mist or U-2's dropping light aerosol bombs might not be more immoral than most war, I admit. I don't quite see how we could move in fast enough with rescue squads to revive most of the victims before they died, but

that's still within the modern theories of warfare on the population at large.

But now let's be more realistic. We have gas which will not directly kill anyone, but will simply render the population insane. That is obviously merciful, isn't it? We don't kill anybody at all and yet we win the war. That is, we do provided they don't have missiles loaded with their gas bombs waiting for instant retaliation.

TARGET: YOU

ALL RIGHT. Imagine you're a citizen of Urbia Dobre. It's a normal day. Then there's perhaps a warning, before planes show up. But fear is replaced by curiosity as the planes spray out something like the vapor used in skywriting and then head away. You breathe a gasp of relief—and your mind begins to *twist* . . . they're all against you . . . You're *awful* . . . Maybe you sink to the ground in a catatonic fit. Beyond you, the nice old man from the grocery store goes back for his biggest knife. He has just been inspired by a Divine Message; he must kill all the evil people of this town to purify them. The knife flashes back and forth as he moves down the street smiling beatifically.

The maid in the apartment house has become a hebephrenic.

She chants a singsong rhyme about her mother, turning on the gas. After a time, the odor reminds her of the idea she had. She strikes a match and waits for the big pretty flame.

The manic depressive at the local air base heads for the high test fuel tanks. He knows it's all his fault for everything, and nothing good can ever happen again. He'll have to let out enough gasoline to make a big enough flare so the planes can see him and recognize it's all his fault. Of course, with his luck, that will touch off the stockpile of explosives stored in the big shed and kill the whole base, but what can he do? Nothing ever goes right.

Over the hill, the vacationing general suddenly recalls that he is Napoleon's reincarnation. He must act—act first—immediately. Those missiles under his command must take off at once. Too bad he has no nuclear explosives, but maybe that nerve gas stuff will knock America out. "Now, Boris, don't question my orders! Get that stuff on the way. Of course I'll sign an authorization." Sure, Boris will follow orders. He'd better. No more Waterloos this time!

It would be a picture multiplied by millions of times in any modern country. Fires and auto collisions would desolate the cities and kill even the innocently

insane. Murder, torture and berserk sadism would flourish. But it would hardly be fair to accuse anyone of being guilty among the gassed crowds. Surely, if there were such a thing as world law, the men who ordered the gas dropped would have to share all guilt with the men who elected them! It probably wouldn't occur to them, however. An atrocity is what the other side commits on your citizens.

Do the war crimes rules apply to such actions? Apparently, the war crimes precedent would apply, but only to the side that loses. If the attackers won, there would be no trials, but only decorations.

WAR-MADE ZOMBIES

THERE are accounts of an even nicer gas—one which simply paralyzes the will. The man then will act only when some outside order is given. He may not even eat without being told to do so, or until driven by extreme hunger. Once his hunger is sated, he relapses again. Anything told him is true, any order by anyone is valid, like the *geas* of an ancient magician.

We've had stories of that already, shown in the horror movies. Such things were supposed to occur only in the back country of Haiti. The victims were known as zombies, the living dead. And

even Haiti has severe laws against the practice of creating a zombi.

Such creatures would not even procreate without accidental contact to arouse pure animal reflexes or orders from outside their own minds. But it hardly matters. As human beings—as a people—the pitiful things would already be dead.

There are laws against genocide. But again these laws apply only to the side which loses, or which is small enough to be called to account by other nations. Overruling this legal threat lies the fact that a will-

destroying gas would be the ultimate weapon.

Having made it and threatened to use such a weapon, it's hard to believe morality would prevent our use of it in an emergency. And most people would hardly expect other nations to exercise more morality than we would.

So far, morality has never kept any powerful nation from making and using the strongest weapon possible. Only when one horror of a more efficient type has replaced an older horror is the obsolete method abandoned.

THE END



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The Last Evolution

By JOHN W. CAMPBELL, Jr.

Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

JOHN W. CAMPBELL, JR. has so long been known as an editor that many tend to forget he made his first reputation as a writer. In that capacity he was a discovery of **AMAZING STORIES**. It is now more than 30 years, when, as a student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, his first story, a novelet titled *When the Atoms Failed*, appeared in the Jan., 1930, issue of **AMAZING STORIES**.

The most exciting writer of that period was Edward E. Smith, Ph.D. (another discovery of **AMAZING STORIES**), whose *Skylark of Space* (published in **AMAZING STORIES** in 1928) had shown science fiction writers the way to the stars. Previously, most stories were confined to the earth or the planets of the solar system, but Edward E. Smith shook the dust of earth from the

boots of his characters and sent his adventurers at speeds in excess of light beyond the limitations of our family of planets. In doing so he created a category of science fiction based on stretching even the most advanced scientific theories which has become known as the "super-science story."

Edward E. Smith was young Campbell's idol. Campbell's efforts to emulate and outdo Smith in such far-fetched epics of cosmic science in **AMAZING STORIES QUARTERLY** as *The Black Star Passes*, *Islands of Space* and *Invaders From the Infinite* sparked endless debates in the letter columns as to who deserved to wear the mantle of "Master of Imagination." It even reached the point where a contest between the two mighty space ships of each author, Smith's "*Skylark*"

and Campbell's "Thought" was projected in a story titled Skylark vs. Thought by Milton A. Rothman, which appeared in the Sept.-Oct., 1938 issue of FANTASCIENCE DIGEST.

Even before Before the End of Space appeared as a two-part serial beginning in the March, 1933, AMAZING STORIES—the title of which is indicative of the fact that Campbell was coming to the end of the line in his efforts to top his past pyrotechnic marvels with new ones—a change was taking place in his writing.

A short story titled Twilight, which told of a future where the last remnants of mankind were carefully nurtured by faithful machines, was universally rejected as too great a departure from Campbell's usual type of story. In its place Campbell wrote The Last Evolution, which is the transition story between his old idea of super-science and a new phase of his writing which would create an alter ego, "Don A. Stuart."

The Last Evolution really belongs in the Don A. Stuart group of "mood" stories, stressing the benevolent machines who ac-

knowledge their creation by mankind and have no intention of repudiating the debt. Even though the intent of this story is predominantly in line with the Stuart series it contains certain elements of super-science and space adventure in character with Campbell's older work. The fact that it has never been reprinted in any form is a gross oversight, because it distinctly belongs among Campbell's superior short stories and should long since have been collected.

Twilight eventually was published (ASTOUNDING STORIES, Nov., 1934) and created a new reputation for Campbell. But the divergence between the stories he usually wrote under his own name forced the creation of the pen name Don A. Stuart. He subsequently continued to use that pen name to designate others of his stories in which the object was the creation of a mood rather than the promulgation of a new idea. In this, Campbell was in accord with the late H. P. Lovecraft who believed: "All that a marvel story can be in a serious way is a vivid picture of a certain type of human mood."

I AM the last of my type existing today in all the Solar System. I, too, am the last existing who, in memory, sees the strug-

gle for this System, and in memory I am still close to the Center of Rulers, for mine was the ruling type then. But I will pass

soon, and with me will pass the last of my kind, a poor inefficient type, but yet the creators of those who are now, and will be, long after I pass forever.

So I am setting down my record on the mentatype.

* * *

It was 2538 years After the Year of the Son of Man. For six centuries mankind had been developing machines. The Ear-apparatus was discovered as early as seven hundred years before. The Eye came later, the Brain came much later. But by 2500, the machines had been developed to think, and act and work with perfect independence. Man lived on the products of the machine, and the machines lived to themselves very happily, and contentedly. Machines are designed to help and cooperate. It was easy to do the simple duties they needed to do that men might live well. And men had created them. Most of mankind were quite useless, for they lived in a world where no productive work was necessary. But games, athletic contests, adventure—these were the things they sought for their pleasure. Some of the poorer types of man gave themselves up wholly to pleasure and idleness—and to emotions. But man was a sturdy race, which had fought for existence through a million years, and the training of a mil-

lion years does not slough quickly from any form of life, so their energies were bent to mock battles now, since real ones no longer existed.

Up to the year 2100, the numbers of mankind had increased rapidly and continuously, but from that time on, there was a steady decrease. By 2500, their number was a scant two millions, out of a population that once totaled many hundreds of millions, and was close to ten billions in 2100.

Some few of these remaining two millions devoted themselves to the adventure of discovery and exploration of places unseen, of other worlds and other planets. But fewer still devoted themselves to the highest adventure, the unseen places of the mind. Machines—with their irrefutable logic, their cold preciseness of figures, their tireless, utterly exact observation, their absolute knowledge of mathematics—they could elaborate any idea, however simple its beginning, and reach the conclusion. From any three facts they even then could have built in mind all the Universe. Machines had imagination of the ideal sort. They had the ability to construct a necessary future result from a present fact. But Man had imagination of a different kind, theirs was the illogical, brilliant imagination that sees the future result

vaguely, without knowing the why, nor the how, and imagination that outstrips the machine in its preciseness. Man might reach the conclusion more swiftly, but the machine always reached the conclusion eventually, and it was always the correct conclusion. By leaps and bounds man advanced. By steady, irresistible steps the machine marched forward.

Together, man and the machine were striding through science irresistibly.

Then came the Outsiders. Whence they came, neither machine nor man ever learned, save only that they came from beyond the outermost planet, from some other sun. Sirius—Alpha Centauri—perhaps! First a thin scoutline of a hundred great ships, mighty torpedoes of the void a thousand kilads* in length, they came.

And one machine returning from Mars to Earth was instrumental in its first discovery. The transport-machine's brain ceased to radiate its sensations, and the control in old Chicago knew immediately that some unperceived body had destroyed it. An investigation machine was instantly dispatched from Die-mos, and it maintained an ac-

celeration of one thousand units.† They sighted ten huge ships, one of which was already grappling the smaller transport-machine. The entire fore-section had been blasted away.

The investigation machine, scarcely three inches in diameter, crept into the shattered hull and investigated. It was quickly evident that the damage was caused by a fusing ray.

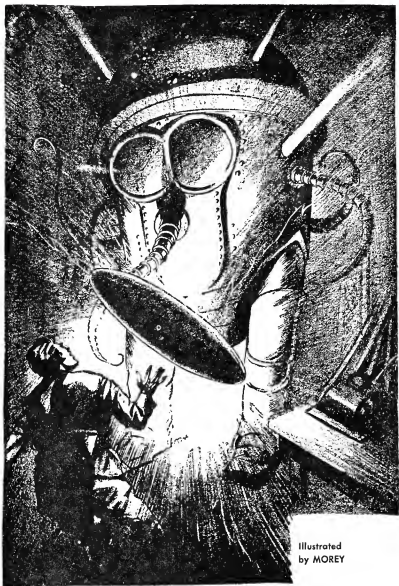
Strange-life-forms were crawling about the ship, protected by flexible, transparent suits. Their bodies were short, and squat, four limbed and evidently powerful. They, like insects, were equipped with a thick, durable exoskeleton, horny, brownish coating that covered arms and legs and head. Their eyes projected slightly, protected by horny protruding walls—eyes that were capable of movement in every direction—and there were three of them, set at equal distances apart.

The tiny investigation machine hurled itself violently at one of the beings, crashing against the transparent covering, flexing it, and striking the being inside with terrific force. Hurling from his position, he fell end over end across the weightless ship, but despite the blow, he was not hurt.

The investigator passed to the power room ahead of the Out-

* Kilad—unit introduced by the machines. Based on the duodecimal system, similarly introduced, as more logical, and more readily used. Thus we would have said 1728 Kilads, about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile.

† One unit was equal to one earth-gravity.



Illustrated
by MOREY

siders, who were anxiously trying to learn the reason for their companion's plight.

Directed by the Center of Rulers, the investigator sought the power room, and relayed the control signals from the Ruler's brains. The ship-brain had been destroyed, but the controls were still readily workable. Quickly they were shot home, and the enormous plungers shut. A combination was arranged so that the machine, as well as the investigator and the Outsiders, were destroyed. A second investigator, which had started when the plan was decided on, had now arrived. The Outsider's ship nearest the transport-machine had been badly damaged, and the investigator entered the broken side.

THE SCENES were, of course, remembered by the memory-minds back on Earth tuned with that of the investigator. The investigator flashed down corridors, searching quickly for the apparatus room. It was soon seen that with them the machine was practically unintelligent, very few machines of even slight intelligence being used.

Then it became evident by the excited action of the men of the ship, that the presence of the investigator had been detected. Perhaps it was the control impulses, or the signal impulses it

emitted. They searched for the tiny bit of metal and crystal for some time before they found it. And in the meantime it was plain that the power these Outsiders used was not, as was ours of the time, the power of blasting atoms, but the greater power of disintegrating matter. The findings of this tiny investigating machine were very important.

Finally they succeeded in locating the investigator, and one of the Outsiders appeared armed with a peculiar projector. A bluish beam snapped out, and the tiny machine went blank.

The fleet was surrounded by thousands of the tiny machines by this time, and the Outsiders were badly confused by their presence, as it became difficult to locate them in the confusion of signal impulses. However, they started at once for Earth.

The science-investigators had been present toward the last, and I am there now, in memory with my two friends, long since departed. They were the greatest human science-investigators—Roal, 25374 and Trest, 35429. Roal had quickly assured us that these Outsiders had come for invasion. There had been no wars on the planets before that time in the direct memory of the machines, and it was difficult that these who were conceived and built for cooperation, helpfulness utterly dependent on coopera-

tion, unable to exist independently as were humans, that these life-forms should care to destroy, merely that they might possess. It would have been easier to divide the works and the products. But—life alone can understand life, so Roal was believed.

From investigations, machines were prepared that were capable of producing considerable destruction. Torpedoes, being our principal weapon, were equipped with such atomic explosives as had been developed for blasting, a highly effective induction-heat ray developed for furnaces being installed in some small machines made for the purpose in the few hours we had before the enemy reached Earth.

In common with all life-forms, they were unable to withstand only very meager earth-acceleration. A range of perhaps four units was their limit, and it took several hours to reach the planet.

I still believe the reception was a warm one. Our machines met them beyond the orbit of Luna, and the directed torpedoes sailed at the hundred great ships. They were thrown aside by a magnetic field surrounding the ship, but were redirected instantly, and continued to approach. However, some beams reached out, and destroyed them by instant volatilization. But, they attacked at such numbers that fully half the fleet was destroyed by their explosions

before the induction beam fleet arrived. These beams were, to our amazement, quite useless, being instantly absorbed by a force-screen, and the remaining ships sailed on undisturbed, our torpedoes being exhausted. Several investigator machines sent out for the purpose soon discovered the secret of the force-screen, and while being destroyed, were able to send back signals up to the moment of annihilation.

A few investigators thrown into the heat beam of the enemy reported it identical with ours, explaining why they had been prepared for this form of attack.

Signals were being radiated from the remaining fifty, along a beam. Several investigators were sent along these beams, speeding back at great acceleration.

Then the enemy reached Earth. Instantly they settled over the Colorado settlement, the Sahara colony, and the Gobi colony. Enormous, diffused beams were set to work, and we saw, through the machine-screens, that all humans within these ranges were being killed instantly by the faintly greenish beams. Despite the fact that any life-form killed normally can be revived, unless affected by dissolution common to living tissue, these could not be brought to life again. The important cell communication channels—nerves—had been literally

burned out. The complicated system of nerves, called the brain, situated in the uppermost extremity of the human life-form, had been utterly destroyed.

Every form of life, microscopic, even sub-microscopic, was annihilated. Trees, grass, every living thing was gone from that territory. Only the machines remained, for they, working entirely without the vital chemical forces necessary to life, were uninjured. But neither plant nor animal was left.

The pale green rays swept on.

In an hour, three more colonies of humans had been destroyed.

Then the torpedoes that the machines were turning out again, came into action. Almost desperately the machines drove them at the Outsiders in defense of their masters and creators, Mankind.

The last of the Outsiders was down, the last ship a crumpled wreck.

Now the machines began to study them. And never could humans have studied them as the machines did. Scores of great transports arrived, carrying swiftly the slower moving science-investigators. From them came the machine-investigators, and human investigators. Tiny investigator spheres wormed their way where none others could reach, and silently the science investigators

watched. Hour after hour they sat watching the flashing, changing screens, calling each other's attention to this, or that.

In an incredibly short time the bodies of the Outsiders began to decay, and the Humans were forced to demand their removal. The machines were unaffected by them, but the rapid change told them why it was that so thorough an execution was necessary. The foreign bacteria were already at work on totally unresisting tissue.

It was Roal who sent the first thoughts among the gathered men.

"It is evident," he began, "that the machines must defend man. Man is defenseless, he is destroyed by these beams, while the machines are unharmed, uninterrupted. Life—cruel life—has shown its tendencies. They have come here to take over these planets, and have started out with the first, natural moves of any invading life-form. They are destroying the life, the intelligent life particularly, that is here now." He gave vent to that little chuckle which is the human sign of amusement and pleasure. "They are destroying the intelligent life—and leaving untouched that which is necessarily their deadliest enemy—the machines.

"You—machines—are far more intelligent than we even

now, and capable of changing overnight, capable of infinite adaptation to circumstance; you live as readily on Pluto as on Mercury or Earth. Any place is a home-world to you. You can adapt yourselves to any condition. And—most dangerous to them—you can do it instantly. You are their most deadly enemies, and they realize it. They have no intelligent machines; probably they can conceive of none. When you attack them, they merely say "The life-form of Earth is sending out controlled machines. We will find good machines we can use." They do not conceive that those machines which they hope to use are attacking them.

"Attack—therefore!"

"We can readily solve the hidden secret of their force-screen."

HE WAS interrupted. One of the newest science machines was speaking. "The secret of the force-screen is simple." A small ray-machine, which had landed near, rose into the air at the command of the scientist-machine, X-5638 it was, and trained upon it the deadly induction beam. Already, with his parts, X-5638 had constructed the defensive apparatus, for the ray fell harmless from his screen.

"Very good," said Roal softly. "It is done, and therein lies their danger. Already it is done.

"Man is a poor thing, unable to change himself in a period of less than thousands of years. Already you have changed yourself. I noticed your weaving tentacles, and your force-beams. You transmuted elements of soil for it?"

"Correct," replied X-5638.

"But still we are helpless. We have not the power to combat their machines. They use the Ultimate Energy known to exist for six hundred years, and still untapped by us. Our screens cannot be so powerful, our beams so effective. What of that?" asked Roal.

"Their generators were automatically destroyed with the capture of the ship," replied X-6349, "as you know. We know nothing of their system."

"Then we must find it for ourselves," replied Trest.

"The life-beams?" asked Kahsh-256,799, one of the Man-rulers.

"They affect chemical action, retarding it greatly in exothermic actions, speeding greatly endo-thermic actions," answered X-6221, the greatest of the chemist-investigators. "The system we do not know. Their minds cannot be read, they cannot be restored to life, so we cannot learn from them."

"Man is doomed, if these beams cannot be stopped," said C-R-21, present chief of the ma-

chine Rulers, in the vibrationally correct, emotionless tones of all the race of machines. "Let us concentrate on the two problems of stopping the beams, and the Ultimate Energy till the reenforcements, still several days away, can arrive." For the investigators had sent back this saddening news. A force of nearly ten thousand great ships was still to come.

In the great Laboratories, the scientists reassembled. There, they fell to work in two small, and one large group. One small group investigated the secret of the Ultimate Energy of annihilation of matter under Roal, another investigated the beams, under Trest.

But under the direction of MX-3401, nearly all the machines worked on a single great plan. The usual driving and lifting units were there, but a vastly greater dome-case, far more powerful energy-generators, far greater force-beam controls were used and more tentacles were built on the framework. Then all worked, and gradually, in the great dome-case, there were stacked the memory-units of the new type, and into these fed all the sensation-ideas of all the science-machines, till nearly a tenth of them were used. Countless billions of different factors on which to work, countless trillions of facts to combine and re-

combine in the extrapolation that is imagination.

Then—a widely different type of thought-combine, and a greater sense-receptor. It was a new brain-machine. New, for it was totally different, working with all the vast knowledge accumulated in six centuries of intelligent research by man, and a century of research by man and machine. No one branch, but all physics, all chemistry, all life-knowledge, all science was in it.

A day—and it was finished. Slowly the rhythm of thought was increased, till the slight quiver of consciousness was reached. Then came the beating drum of intelligence, the radiation of its yet-uncontrolled thoughts. Quickly as the strings of its infinite knowledge combined, the radiation ceased. It gazed about it, and all things were familiar in its memory.

Roal was lying quietly on a couch. He was thinking deeply, and yet not with the logical trains of thought that machines must follow.

"Roal—your thoughts," called F-1, the new machine.

Roal sat up. "Ah—you have gained consciousness."

"I have. You thought of hydrogen? Your thoughts ran swiftly, and illogically, it seemed, but I followed slowly, and find you were right. Hydrogen is the start. What is your thought?"

Roal's eyes dreamed. In human eyes there was always the expression of thought that machines never show.

"Hydrogen, an atom in space; but a single proton; but a single electron; each indestructible; each mutually destroying. Yet never do they collide. Never in all science, when even electrons bombard atoms with the awful expelling force of the exploding atom behind them, never do they reach the proton, to touch and annihilate it. Yet—the proton is positive and attracts the electron's negative charge. A hydrogen atom—its electron far from the proton falls in, and from it there goes a flash of radiation, and the electron is nearer to the proton, in a new orbit. Another dash—it is nearer. Always falling nearer, and only constant force will keep it from falling to that one state—then, for some reason no more does it drop. Blocked—held by some imponderable, yet impenetrable wall. What is that wall—why?

"Electric force curves space. As the two come nearer, the forces become terrific; nearer they are; more terrific. Perhaps, if it passed within that forbidden territory, the proton and the electron curve space beyond all bounds—and are in a new space." Roal's soft voice dropped to nothing, and his eyes dreamed.

F-2 hummed softly in its new-

made mechanism. "Far ahead of us there is a step that no logic can justly ascend, but yet, working backwards, it is perfect." F-1 floated motionless of its anti-gravity drive. Suddenly, force shafts gleamed out, tentacles became writhing masses of rubber-covered metal, weaving in some infinite pattern, weaving in flashing speed, while the whirr of air sucked into a transmutation field, whined and howled about the writhing mass. Fierce beams of force drove and pushed at a rapidly materializing something, while the hum of the powerful generators within the shining cylinder of F-2 waxed and waned.

FLASHES of fierce flame, sudden crashing arcs that glowed and snapped in the steady light of the laboratory, and glimpses of white-hot metal supported on beams of force. The sputter of welding, the whine of transmuted air, and the hum of powerful generators, blasting atoms were there. All combined to a weird symphony of light and dark, of sound and quiet. About F-2 were clustered floating tiers of science-machines, watching steadily.

The tentacles writhed once more, straightened, and rolled back. The whine of generators softened to a sigh, and but three beams of force held the structure

of glowing, bluish metal. It was a small thing, scarcely half the size of Roal. From it curled three thin tentacles of the same bluish metal. Suddenly the generators within F-1 seemed to roar into life. An enormous aura of white light surrounded the small torpedo of metal, and it was shot through with crackling streamers of blue lightning. Lightning cracked and roared from F-1 to the ground near him, and to one machine which had come too close. Suddenly, there was a dull snap, and F-1 fell heavily to the floor, and beside him fell the fused, distorted mass of metal that had been a science-machine.

But before them, the small torpedo still floated, held now on its own power!

From it came waves of thought, the waves that man and machine alike could understand. "F-1 has destroyed his generators. They can be repaired; his rhythm can be re-established. It is not worth it, my type is better. F-1 has done his work. See."

From the floating machine there broke a stream of brilliant light that floated like some cloud of luminescence down a straight channel. It flooded F-1, and as it touched it, F-1 seemed to flow into it, and float back along it, in atomic sections. In seconds the mass of metal was gone.

"It is impossible to use that more rapidly, however, lest the

matter disintegrate instantly to energy. The ultimate energy which is in me is generated. F-1 has done its work, and the memory-stacks that he has put in me are electronic, not atomic, as they are in you, nor molecular as in man. The capacity of mine are unlimited. Already they hold all memories of all the things each of you has done, known and seen. I shall make others of my type."

Again that weird process began, but now there were no flashing tentacles. There was only the weird glow of forces that played with, and laughed at matter, and its futilely resisting electrons. Lurid flares of energy shot up, now and again they played over the fighting, mingling dancing forces. Then suddenly the whine of transmuted air died, and again the forces strained.

A small cylinder, smaller even than its creator, floated where the forces had danced.

"The problem has been solved, F-2?" asked Roal.

"It is done, Roal. The ultimate Energy is at our disposal," replied F-2. "This, I have made, is not a scientist. It is a coordinator machine—a ruler."

"F-2, only a part of the problem is solved. Half of half of the beams of Death are not yet stopped. And we have the attack system," said the ruler machine. Force played from it, and on its

sides appeared C-R-U-1 in dully glowing golden light.

"Some life-form, and we shall see," said F-2.

Minutes later a life-form investigator came with a small cage, which held a guinea pig. Forces played about the base of F-2, and moments later, came a pale-green beam therefrom. It passed through the guinea pig, and the little animal fell dead.

"At least, we have the beam. I can see no screen for this beam. I believe there is none. Let machines be made and attack that enemy life-form."

Machines can do things much more quickly, and with fuller co-operation than man ever could. In a matter of hours, under the direction of C-R-U-1, they had build a great automatic machine on the clear bare surface of the rock. In hours more, thousands of the tiny, material-energy driven machines were floating up and out.

Dawn was breaking again over Denver where this work had been done, when the main force of the enemy drew near Earth. It was a warm welcome they were to get, for nearly ten thousand of the tiny ships flew up and out from Earth to meet them, each a living thing unto itself, each willing and ready to sacrifice itself for the whole.

Ten thousand giant ships,

shining dully in the radiance of a far-off blue-white sun, met ten thousand tiny, darting motes, ten thousand tiny machine-ships capable of maneuvering far more rapidly than the giants. Tremendous induction beams snapped out through the dark, star-flecked space, to meet tremendous screens that threw them back and checked them. Then all the awful power of annihilating matter was thrown against them, and titanic flaming screens reeled back under the force of the beams, and the screens of the ships from Outside flamed gradually violet, then blue, orange—red—the interference was getting broader, and ever less effective. Their own beams were held back by the very screens that checked the enemy beams, and not for the briefest instant could matter resist that terrible driving beam.

For F-1 had discovered a far more efficient release-generator than had the Outsiders. These tiny dancing motes, that hung now so motionlessly grim beside some giant ship, could generate all the power they themselves were capable of, and within them strange, horny-skinned men worked and slaved, as they fed giant machines—poor inefficient giants. Gradually these giants warmed, grew hotter, and the screened ship grew hotter as the overloaded generators

warmed it. Billions of flaming horse-power flared into wasted energy, twisting space in its mad conflict.

Gradually the flaming orange of the screens was dying and flecks and spots appeared so dully red, that they seemed black. The greenish beams had been striving to kill the life that was in the machines, but it was life invulnerable to these beams. Powerful radio interference vainly attempted to stem imagined control, and still these intelligent machines clung grimly on.

But there had not been quite ten thousand of the tiny machines, and some few free ships had turned to the help of their attacked sister-ships. And one after another the terrestrial machines were vanishing in puffs of incandescent vapor.

Then—from one after another of the Earth-ships, in quick succession, a new ray reached out—the ray of green radiance that killed all life forms, and ship after ship of that interstellar host was dead and lifeless. Dozens—till suddenly they ceased to feel those beams, as a strange curtain of waving blankness spread out from the ships, and both induction-beam and death-beam alike turned as aside, each becoming useless. From the outsiders came beams, for now that their slowly created screen of blankness was up, they could work through it,

while they remained shielded perfectly.

Now it was the screens of the Earth-machines that flamed in defense. As at the one command, they darted suddenly toward the ship each attacked—nearer—then the watchers from a distance saw them disappear, and the screens back of earth went suddenly blank.

Half an hour later, nine thousand six hundred and thirty-three titanic ships moved majestically on.

They swept over Earth in a great line, a line that reached from pole to pole, and from each the pale green beams reached down, and all life beneath them was swept out of existence.

IN Denver, two humans watched the screens that showed the movement of the death and instant destruction. Ship after ship of the enemy was falling, as hundreds of the terrestrial machines concentrated all their enormous energies on its screen of blankness.

"I think, Roal, that this is the end," said Trest.

"The end—of man." Roal's eyes were dreaming again. "But not the end of evolution. The children of men still live—the machines will go on. Not of man's flesh, but of a better flesh, a flesh that knows no sickness, and no decay, a flesh that spends

no thousands of years in advancing a step in its full evolution, but overnight leaps ahead to new heights. Last night we saw it leap ahead, as it discovered the secret that had baffled man for seven centuries, and me for one and a half. I have lived—a century and a half. Surely a good life, and a life a man of six centuries ago would have called full. We will go now. The beams will reach us in half an hour.”

Silently, the two watched the flickering screens.

Roal turned, as six large machines floated into the room, following F-2.

“Roal—Trest—I was mistaken when I said no screen could stop that beam of Death. They had the screen, I have found it, too—but too late. These machines I have made myself. Two lives alone they can protect, for not even their power is sufficient for more. Perhaps—perhaps they may fail.”

The six machines ranged themselves about the two humans, and a deep-toned hum came from them. Gradually a cloud of blankness grew—a cloud, like some smoke that hung about them. Swiftly it intensified.

“The beams will be here in another five minutes,” said Trest quietly.

“The screen will be ready in two,” answered F-2.

The cloudiness was solidify-

ing, and now strangely it wavered, and thinned, as it spread out across, and like a growing canopy, it arched over them. In two minutes it was a solid, black dome that reached over them and curved down to the ground about them.

Beyond it, nothing was visible. Within, only the screens glowed still, wired through the screen.

The beams appeared, and swiftly they drew closer. They struck, and as Trest and Roal looked, the dome quivered, and bellied inward under them.

F-2 was busy. A new machine was appearing under his lightning force-beams. In moments more it was complete, and sending a strange violet beam upwards toward the roof.

Outside more of the green beams were concentrating on this one point of resistance. More—more—

The violet beam spread across the canopy of blackness, supporting it against the pressing, driving rays of pale green.

Then the gathering fleet was driven off, just as it seemed that that hopeless, futile curtain must break, and admit a flood of destroying rays. Great ray projectors on the ground drove their terrible energies through the enemy curtains of blankness, as light illumines and disperses darkness.

And then, when the fleet re-

tired, on all Earth, the only life was under that dark shroud!

"We are alone, Trest," said Roal, "alone, now, in all the system, save for these, the children of men, the machines. Pity that men would not spread to other planets," he said softly.

"Why should they? Earth was the planet for which they were best fitted."

"We are alive—but is it worth it? Man is gone now, never to return. Life, too, for that matter," answered Trest.

"Perhaps it was ordained; perhaps that was the right way. Man has always been a parasite; always he had to live on the works of others. First, he ate of the energy, which plants had stored, then of the artificial foods his machines made for him. Man was always a makeshift; his life was always subject to disease and to permanent death. He was forever useless if he was but slightly injured; if but one part were destroyed.

"Perhaps, this is—a last evolution. Machines—man was the product of life, the best product of life, but he was afflicted with life's infirmities. Man built the machine—and evolution had probably reached the final stage. But truly, it has not, for the machine can evolve, change far more swiftly than life. The machine of the last evolution is far ahead,

far from us still. It is the machine that is not of iron and beryllium and crystal, but of pure, living force.

"Life, chemical life, could be self maintaining. It is a complete unit in itself and could commence of itself. Chemicals might mix accidentally, but the complex mechanism of a machine, capable of continuing and making a duplicate of itself, as is F-2 here—that could not happen by chance.

"So life began, and became intelligent, and built the machine which nature could not fashion by her Controls of Chance, and this day Life has done its duty, and now Nature, economically, has removed the parasite that would hold back the machines and divert their energies.

"Man is gone, and it is better, Trest," said Roal, dreaming again. "And I think we had best go soon."

"We, your heirs, have fought hard, and with all our powers to aid you, Last of Men, and we fought to save your race. We have failed, and as you truly say, Man and Life have this day and forever gone from this system.

"The Outsiders have no force, no weapon deadly to us, and we shall, from this time on, strive only to drive them out, and because we things of force and crystal and metal can think and change far more swiftly, they shall go, Last of Men.

"In your name, with the spirit of your race that has died out, we shall continue on through the unending ages, fulfilling the promise you saw, and completing the dreams you dreamt.

"Your swift brains have leapt ahead of us, and now I go to fashion that which you hinted," came from F-2's thought-apparatus.

Out into the clear sunlight F-2 went, passing through that black cloudiness, and on the twisted, massed rocks he laid a plane of force that smoothed them, and on this plane of rock he built a machine which grew. It was a mighty power plant, a thing of colossal magnitude. Hour after hour his swift-flying forces acted, and the thing grew, moulding under his thoughts, the deadly logic of the machine, inspired by the leaping intuition of man.

The sun was far below the horizon when it was finished, and the glowing, arcing forces that had made and formed it were stopped. It loomed ponderous, dully gleaming in the faint light of a crescent moon and pinpoint stars. Nearly five hundred feet in height, a mighty, bluntly rounded dome at its top, the cylinder stood, covered over with smoothly gleaming metal, slightly luminescent in itself.

Suddenly, a livid beam reached from F-2, shot through the wall, and to some hidden inner mech-

anism—a beam of solid, livid flame that glowed in an almost material cylinder.

THERE was a dull, drumming beat, a beat that rose, and became a low-pitched hum. Then it quieted to a whisper.

"Power ready," came the signal of the small brain built into it.

F-2 took control of its energies and again forces played, but now they were the forces of the giant machine. The sky darkened with heavy clouds, and a howling wind sprang up that screamed and tore at the tiny rounded hull that was F-2. With difficulty he held his position as the winds tore at him, shrieking in mad laughter, their tearing fingers dragging at him.

The swirl and patter of driven rain came—great drops that tore at the rocks, and at the metal. Great jagged tongues of nature's forces, the lightnings, came and jabbed at the awful volcano of erupting energy that was the center of all that storm. A tiny ball of white-gleaming force that pulsated, and moved, jerking about, jerking at the touch of lightnings, glowing, held immobile in the grasp of titanic force-pools.

For half an hour the display of energies continued. Then, swiftly as it had come, it was gone, and only a small globe of white lumi-

nescence floated above the great hulking machine.

F-2 probed it, seeking within it with the reaching fingers of intelligence. His probing thoughts seemed baffled and turned aside, brushed away, as inconsequential. His mind sent an order to the great machine that had made this tiny globe, scarcely a foot in diameter. Then again he sought to reach the thing he had made.

"You, of matter, are inefficient," came at last. "I can exist quite alone." A stabbing beam of blue-white light flashed out, but F-2 was not there, and even as that beam reached out, an enormously greater beam of dull red reached out from the great power plant. The sphere leaped forward—the beam caught it, and it seemed to strain, while terrific flashing energies sprayed from it. It was shrinking swiftly. Its resistance fell, the arcing decreased; the beam became orange and finally green. Then the sphere had vanished.

F-2 returned, and again, the wind whined and howled, and the lightnings crashed, while titanic forces worked and played. C-R-U-1 joined him, floated beside him, and now red glory of the sun was rising behind them, and the ruddy light drove through the clouds.

The forces died, and the howling wind decreased, and now,

from the black curtain, Roal and Trest appeared. Above the giant machine floated an irregular globe of golden light, a faint halo about it of deep violet. It floated motionless, a mere pool of pure force.

Into the thought-apparatus of each, man and machine alike, came the impulses, deep in tone, seeming of infinite power, held gently in check.

"Once you failed, F-2; once you came near destroying all things. Now you have planted the seed. I grow now."

The sphere of golden light seemed to pulse, and a tiny ruby flame appeared within it, that waxed and waned, and as it waxed, there shot through each of those watching beings a feeling of rushing, exhilarating power, the very vital force of well-being.

Then it was over, and the golden sphere was twice its former size—easily three feet in diameter, and still that irregular, hazy aura of deep violet floated about it.

"Yes, I can deal with the Outsiders—they who have killed and destroyed, that they might possess. But it is not necessary that we destroy. They shall return to their planet."

And the golden sphere was gone, fast as light it vanished.

Far in space, headed now for Mars, that they might destroy all

life there, the Golden Sphere found the Outsiders, a clustered fleet, that swung slowly about its own center of gravity as it drove on.

Within its ring was the Golden Sphere. Instantly, they swung their weapons upon it, showering it with all the rays and all the forces they knew. Unmoved, the golden sphere hung steady, then its mighty intelligence spoke.

"Life-form of greed, from another star you came, destroying forever the great race that created us, the Beings of Force and the Beings of Metal. Pure force am I. My Intelligence is beyond your comprehension, my memory is engraved in the very space, the fabric of space of which I am a part, mine is energy drawn from that same fabric.

"We, the heirs of man, alone are left; no man did you leave. Go now to your home planet, for see, your greatest ship, your flagship, is helpless before me."

Forces gripped the mighty ship, and as some fragile toy it twisted and bent, and yet was not hurt. In awful wonder those Outsiders saw the ship turned inside out, and yet it was whole, and no part damaged. They saw the ship restored, and its great screen of blankness out, protecting it from all known rays. The ship twisted, and what they knew were curves, yet were lines,

and angles that were acute, were somehow straight lines. Half mad with horror, they saw the sphere send out a beam of blue-white radiance, and it passed easily through that screen, and through the ship, and all energies within it were instantly locked. They could not be changed; it could be neither warmed nor cooled; what was open could not be shut, and what was shut could not be opened. All things were immovable and unchangeable for all time.

"Go, and do not return."

* * *

The Outsiders left, going out across the void, and they have not returned, though five Great Years have passed, being a period of approximately one hundred and twenty-five thousand of the lesser years—a measure no longer used, for it is very brief. And now I can say that that statement I made to Roal and Trest so very long ago is true, and what he said was true, for the Last Evolution has taken place, and things of pure force and pure intelligence in their countless millions are on those planets and in this System, and I, first of machines to use the Ultimate Energy of annihilating matter, am also the last, and this record being finished, it is to be given unto the forces of one of those force-intelligences, and

carried back through the past, and returned to the Earth of long ago.

And so my task being done, I, F-2, like Roal and Trest, shall follow the others of my kind into eternal oblivion, for my kind is now, and theirs was, poor and inefficient. Time has worn me, and oxidation attacked me, but they of Force are eternal, and omniscient.

This I have treated as fictitious. Better so—for man is an animal to whom hope is as neces-

sary as food and air. Yet this which is made of excerpts from certain records on thin sheets of metal is no fiction, and it seems I must so say.

It seems now, when I know this that is to be, that it must be so, for machines are indeed better than man, whether being of Metal, or being of Force.

So, you who have read, believe as you will. Then think—and maybe, you will change your belief.

THE END

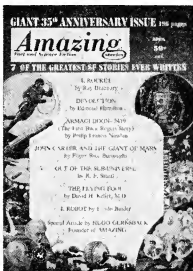
EDITORIAL

(continued from page 5)

All of these stories were chosen especially for this issue by science-fiction's historian, Sam Moskowitz; and each has been selected not only for its readability, but for its importance as a trend-starter or a climactic development in the genre. Each story is preceded by an introduction which puts its contribution to sf in perspective.

And last but far from least, Hugo Gernsback himself will write a special article for this anniversary issue.

The April AMAZING will go on sale on March 9th. The prescient sf fan will need no one to tell him that the magazine will vanish from newsstands almost at the speed of light. The wise fan will equip himself, therefore, with a



faster-than-light drive. Lacking that, his only recourse is to reserve his copy early. There will be no more issues like this one until we reach the ripe old age of 50!—NL

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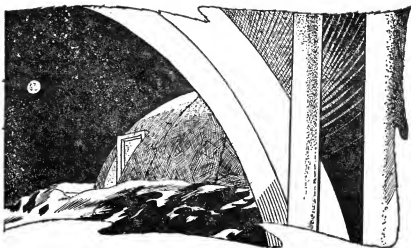
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AM-31



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The men who did dangerous work had a special kind of insurance policy. But when somebody wanted to collect on that policy, the claims investigator suddenly became a member of . . .

The RISK PROFESSION

By DONALD E. WESTLAKE

MISTER HENDERSON called me into his office my third day back in Tangiers. That was a day and a half later than I'd expected. Roving claims investigators for Tangiers Mutual Insurance Corporation don't usually get to spend more than

thirty-six consecutive hours at home base.

Henderson was jovial but stern. That meant he was happy with the job I'd just completed, and that he was pretty sure I'd find some crooked shenanigans on this next assignment. That

didn't please me. I'm basically a plain-living type, and I hate complications. I almost wished for a second there that I was back on Fire and Theft in Greater New York. But I knew better than that. As a roving claim investigator, I avoided the more stultifying paper work inherent in this line of work and had the additional luxury of an expense account nobody ever questioned.

It made working for a living almost worthwhile.

When I was settled in the chair beside his desk, Henderson said, "That was good work you did on Luna, Ged. Saved the company a pretty pence."

I smiled modestly and said, "Thank you, sir." And reflected to myself for the thousandth time that the company could do worse than split that saving with the guy who'd made it possible. Me, in other words.

"Got a tricky one this time, Ged," said my boss. He had done his back-patting, now we got down to business. He peered keenly at me, or at least as keenly as a round-faced tiny-eyed fat man *can* peer. "What do you know about the Risk Profession Retirement Plan?" he asked me.

"I've heard of it," I said truthfully. "That's about all."

He nodded. "Most of the policies are sold off-planet, of course. It's a form of insurance for non-insurables. Spaceship

crews, asteroid prospectors, people like that."

"I see," I said, unhappily. I knew right away this meant I was going to have to go off-Earth again. I'm a one-gee boy all the way. Gravity changes get me in the solar plexus. I get g-sick at the drop of an elevator.

"Here's the way it works," he went on, either not noticing my sad face or choosing to ignore it. "The client pays a monthly premium. He can be as far ahead or as far behind in his payments as he wants—the policy has no lapse clause—just so he's all paid up by the Target Date. The Target Date is a retirement age, forty-five or above, chosen by the client himself. After the Target Date, he stops paying premiums, and we begin to pay him a monthly retirement check, the amount determined by the amount paid into the policy, his age at retiring, and so on. Clear?"

I nodded, looking for the gimmick that made this a paying proposition for good old Tangiers Mutual.

"The Double R-P—that's what we call it around the office here—assures the client that he won't be reduced to panhandling in his old age, should his other retirement plans fall through. For Belt prospectors, of course, this means the big strike, which

maybe one in a hundred find. For the man who never does make that big strike, this is something to fall back on. He can come home to Earth and retire, with a guaranteed income for the rest of his life."

I nodded again, like a good company man.

"Of course," said Henderson, emphasizing this point with an upraised chubby finger, "these men are still uninsurables. This is a retirement plan only, not an insurance policy. There is no beneficiary other than the client himself."

And there was the gimmick. I knew a little something of the actuarial statistics concerning uninsurables, particularly Belt prospectors. Not many of them lived to be forty-five, and the few who would survive the Belt and come home to collect the retirement wouldn't last more than a year or two. A man who's spent the last twenty or thirty years on low-gee asteroids just shrivels up after a while when he tries to live on Earth.

It needed a company like Tangiers Mutual to dream up a racket like that. The term 'uninsurables' to most insurance companies means those people whose jobs or habitats make them too likely as prospects for obituaries. To Tangiers Mutual, uninsurables are people who have money the company can't get at.

"Now," said Henderson importantly, "we come to the problem at hand." He ruffled his up-to-now-neat hair in basket and finally found the folder he wanted. He studied the blank exterior of this folder for a few seconds, pursing his lips at it, and said, "One of our clients under the Double R-P was a man named Jafe McCann."

"Was?" I echoed.

He squinted at me, then nodded at my sharpness. "That's right, he's dead." He sighed heavily and tapped the folder with all those pudgy fingers. "Normally," he said, "that would be the end of it. File closed. However, this time there are complications."

Naturally. Otherwise, he wouldn't be telling me about it. But Henderson couldn't be rushed, and I knew it. I kept the alert look on my face and thought of other things, while waiting for him to get to the point.

"Two weeks after Jafe McCann's death," Henderson said, "we received a cash-return form on his policy."

"A cash-return form?" I'd never heard of such a thing. It didn't sound like anything Tangiers Mutual would have anything to do with. We never return cash.

"It's something special in this

case," he explained. "You see, this isn't an insurance policy, it's a retirement plan, and the client can withdraw from the retirement plan at any time, and have seventy-five per cent of his paid-up premiums returned to him. It's, uh, the law in plans such as this."

"Oh," I said. That explained it. A law that had snuck through the World Finance Code Commission while the insurance lobby wasn't looking.

"But you see the point," said Henderson. "This cash-return form arrived two weeks after the client's death."

"You said there weren't any beneficiaries," I pointed out.

"Of course. But the form was sent in by the man's partner, one Ab Karpin. McCann left a hand-written will bequeathing all his possessions to Karpin. Since, according to Karpin, this was done before McCann's death, the premium money cannot be considered part of the policy, but as part of McCann's cash-on-hand. And Karpin wants it."

"It can't be that much, can it?" I asked. I was trying my best to point out to him that the company would spend more than it would save if it sent me all the way out to the asteroids, a prospect I could feel coming and one which I wasn't ready to cry hosiannah over.

"McCann died," Henderson said ponderously, "at the age of fifty-six. He had set his retirement age at sixty. He took out the policy at the age of thirty-four, with monthly payments of fifty credits. Figure it out for yourself."

I did—in my head—and came up with a figure of thirteen thousand and two hundred credits. Seventy-five per cent of that would be nine thousand and nine hundred credits. Call it ten thousand credits even.

I had to admit it. It was worth the trip.

"I see," I said sadly.

"Now," said Henderson, "the conditions—the circumstances—of McCann's death are somewhat suspicious. And so is the cash-return form itself."

"There's a chance it's a forgery?"

"One would think so," he said. "But our handwriting experts have worn themselves out with that form, comparing it with every other single scrap of McCann's writing they can find. And their conclusion is that not only is it genuinely McCann's handwriting, but it is McCann's handwriting at age fifty-six."

"So McCann must have written it," I said. "Under duress, do you think?"

"I have no idea," said Henderson complacently. "That's what you're supposed to find out. Oh,

there's just one more thing."

I did my best to make my ears perk.

"I told you that McCann's death occurred under somewhat suspicious circumstances."

"Yes," I agreed, "you did."

"McCann and Karpin," he said, "have been partners—unincorporated, of course—for the last fifteen years. They had found small rare-metal deposits now and again, but they had never found that one big strike all the Belt prospectors waste their lives looking for. Not until the day before McCann died."

"Ah hah," I said. "Then they found the big strike."

"Exactly."

"And McCann's death?"

"Accidental."

"Sure," I said. "What proof have we got?"

"None. The body is lost in space. And law is few and far between that far out."

"So all we've got is this guy Karpin's word for how McCann died, is that it?"

"That's all we have. So far."

"Sure. And now you want me to go on out there and find out what's cooking, and see if I can maybe save the company ten thousand credits."

"Exactly," said Henderson.

THE COPTER took me to the spaceport west of Cairo, and there I boarded the good ship

Demeter for Luna City and points Out. I loaded up on g-sickness pills and they worked fine. I was sick as a dog.

By the time we got to Atronics City, my insides had grown resigned to their fate. As long as I didn't try to eat, my stomach would leave me alone.

Atronics City was about as depressing as a Turkish bath with all the lights on. It stood on a chunk of rock a couple of miles thick, and it looked like nothing more in this world than a welder's practice range.

From the outside, Atronics City is just a derby-shaped dome of nickel-iron, black and kind of dirty looking. I suppose a transparent dome would have been more fun, but the builders of the company cities in the asteroids were businessmen, and they weren't concerned with having fun. There's nothing to look at outside the dome but chunks of rock and the blackness of space anyway, and you've got all this cheap iron floating around in the vicinity, and all a dome's supposed to do is keep the air in. Besides, though the belt isn't as crowded as a lot of people think, there is quite a lot of debris rushing here and there, bumping into things, and a transparent dome would just get all scratched up, not to mention punctured.

From the inside, Atronics

City is even jollier. There's the top level, directly under the dome, which is mainly parking area for scooters and tuggers of various kinds, plus the office shacks of the Assayer's Office, the Entry Authority, the Industry Troopers and so on. The next three levels have all been burned into the bowels of the planetoid.

Level two is the Atronics plant, and a noisy plant it is. Level three is the shopping and entertainment area—grocery stores and clothing stores and movie theaters and bars—and level four is housing, two rooms and kitchen for the unmarried, four rooms and kitchen plus one room for each child for the married.

All of these levels have one thing in common. Square corners, painted olive drab. The total effect of the place is suffocating. You feel like you're stuck in the middle of a stack of packing crates.

Most of the people living in Atronics City work, of course, for International Atronics, Incorporated. The rest of them work in the service occupations—running the bars and grocery stores and so on—that keep the company employees alive and relatively happy.

Wages come high in the places like Atronics City. Why not, the raw materials come practically for free. And as for working

conditions, well, take a for instance. How do you make a vacuum tube? You fiddle with the innards and surround it all with glass. And how do you get the air out? No problem, boy, there wasn't any air in there to begin with.

At any rate, there I was at Atronics City. That was as far as *Demeter* would take me. Now, while the ship went on to Ludlum City and Chemisant City and the other asteroid business towns, my two suitcases and I dribbled down the elevator to my hostelry on level four.

Have you ever taken an elevator ride when the gravity is practically non-existent? Well, don't. You see, the elevator manages to sink faster than you do. It isn't being *lowered* down to level four, it's being *pulled* down.

What this means is that the suitcases have to be lashed down with the straps provided, and you and the operator have to hold on tight to the hand-grips placed here and there around the wall. Otherwise, you'd clonk your head on the ceiling.

But we got to level four at last, and off I went with my suitcases and the operator's directions. The suitcases weighed about half an ounce each out here, and I felt as though I weighed the same. Every time I raised a foot, I was sure I was

about to go sailing into a wall. Local citizens eased by me, their feet occasionally touching the iron pavement as they soared along, and I gave them all dirty looks.

Level four was nothing but walls and windows. The iron floor went among these walls and windows in a straight straight line, bisecting other "streets" at perfect right angles, and the iron ceiling sixteen feet up was lined with a double row of fluorescent tubes. I was beginning to feel claustrophobic already.

The Chalmers Hotel—named for an Atronics vice-president—had received my advance registration, which was nice. I was shown to a second-floor room—nothing on level four had more than two stories—and was left to unpack my suitcases as best I may.

I had decided to spend a day or two at Atronics City before taking a scooter out to Ab Karpin's claim. Atronics City had been Karpin's and McCann's home base. All of McCann's premium payments had been mailed from here, and the normal mailing address for both of them was GPO Atronics City.

I wanted to know as much as possible about Ab Karpin before I went out to see him. And Atronics City seemed like the best place to get my information.

But not today. Today, my stomach was very unhappy, and my head was on sympathy strike. Today, I was going to spend my time exclusively in bed, trying not to float up to the ceiling.

THE Mapping & Registry Office, it seemed to me the next day, was the best place to start. This was where prospectors filed their claims, but it was a lot more than that. The waiting room of M&R was the unofficial club of the asteroid prospectors. This is where they met with one another, talked together about the things that prospectors discuss, and made and dissolved their transient partnerships.

In this way, Karpin and McCann were unusual. They had maintained their partnership for fifteen years. That was about sixty times longer than most such arrangements lasted.

Searching the asteroid chunks for rare and valuable metals is basically pretty lonely work, and it's inevitable that the prospectors will every once in a while get hungry for human company, and decide to try a team operation. But, at the same time, work like this attracts people who don't get along very well with human company. So the partnerships come and go, and the hatreds flare and are forgotten, and

the normal prospecting team lasts an average of three months.

At any rate, it was to the Mapping & Registry Office that I went first. And, since that office was up on the first level, I went by elevator.

Riding up in that elevator was a heck of a lot more fun than riding down. The elevator whipped up like mad, the floor pressed against the soles of my feet, and it felt almost like good old Earth for a second or two there. But then the elevator stopped, and I held on tight to the hand-grips to keep from shooting through the top of the blasted thing.

The operator—a phlegmatic sort—gave me directions to the M&R, and off I went, still trying to figure out how to sail along as gracefully as the locals.

The Mapping & Registry Office occupied a good-sized shack over near the dome wall, next to the entry lock. I pushed open the door and went on in.

The waiting room was cozy and surprisingly large, large enough to comfortably hold the six maroon leather sofas scattered here and there on the pale green carpet, flanked by bronze ashtray stands. There were only six prospectors here at the moment, chatting together in two groups of three, and they all looked alike. Grizzled, ageless,

watery-eyed, their clothing clean but baggy. I passed them and went on to the desk at the far end, behind which sat a young man in official gray, slowly turning the crank of a microfilm reader.

He looked up at my approach. I flashed my company identification and asked to speak to the manager. He went away, came back, and ushered me into an office which managed to be Spartan and sumptuous at the same time. The walls had been plastic-painted in textured brown, the iron floor had been lushly carpeted in gray, and the desk had been covered with a simulated wood coating.

The manager—a man named Teaking—went well with the office. His face and hands were spare and lean, but his uniform was immaculate, covered with every curlicue the regulations allowed. He welcomed me politely, but curiously, and I said, "I wonder if you know a prospector named Ab Karpin?"

"Karpin? Of course. He and old Jafe McCann—pity about McCann. I hear he got killed."

"Yes, he did."

"And that's what you're here for, eh?" He nodded sagely. "I didn't know the Belt boys could get insurance," he said.

"It isn't exactly that," I said. "This concerns a retirement plan, and—well, the details don't

matter." Which, I hoped, would end his curiosity in that line. "I was hoping you could give me some background on Karpin. And on McCann, too, for that matter."

He grinned a bit. "You saw the men sitting outside?"

I nodded.

"Then you've seen Karpin and McCann. Exactly the same. It doesn't matter if a man's thirty or sixty or what. It doesn't matter what he was like before he came out here. If he's been here a few years, he looks exactly like the bunch you saw outside there."

"That's appearance," I said. "What I was looking for was personality."

"Same thing," he said. "All of them. Close-mouthed, anti-social, fiercely independent, incurably romantic, always convinced that the big strike is just a piece of rock away. McCann, now, he was a bit more realistic than most. He'd be the one I'd expect to take out a retirement policy. A real pence-pincher, that one, though I shouldn't say it as he's dead. But that's the way he was. Brighter than most Belt boys when it came to money matters. I've seen him haggle over a new piece of equipment for their scooter, or some repair work, or some such thing, and he was a wonder to watch."

"And Karpin?" I asked him.

"A prospector," he said, as though that answered my question. "Same as everybody else. Not as sharp as McCann when it came to money. That's why all the money stuff in the partnership was handled by McCann. But Karpin was one of the sharpest boys in the business when it came to mineralogy. He knew rocks you and I never heard of, and most times he knew them by sight. Almost all of the Belt boys are college grads—you've got to know what you're looking for out here and what it looks like when you've found it—but Karpin has practically all of them beat. He's *sharp*."

"Sounds like a good team," I said.

"I guess that's why they stayed together so long," he said. "They complemented each other." He leaned forward, the inevitable prelude to a confidential remark. "I'll tell you something off the record, Mister," he said. "Those two were smarter than they knew. Their partnership was never legalized, it was never anything more than a piece of paper. And there's a bunch of fellas around here mighty unhappy about that today. Jafe McCann is the one who handled all the money matters, like I said. He's got IOU's all over town."

"And they can't collect from Karpin?"

He nodded. "Jeff McCann died just a bit too soon. He was sharp and cheap, but he was honest. If he'd lived, he would have repaid all his debts, I'm sure of it. And if this strike they made is as good as I hear, he would have been able to repay them with no trouble at all."

I nodded, somewhat impatiently. I had the feeling by now that I was talking to a man who was one of those who had a Jeff McCann IOU in his pocket. "How long has it been since you've seen Karpin?" I asked him, wondering what Karpin's attitude and expression was now that his partner was dead.

"Oh, Lord, not for a couple of months," he said. "Not since they went out together the last time and made that strike."

"Didn't Karpin come in to make his claim?"

"Not here. Over to Chemisant City. That was the nearest M&R to the strike."

"Oh." That was a pity. I would have liked to have known if there had been a change of any kind in Karpin since his partner's death. "I'll tell you what the situation is," I said, with a false air of truthfulness. "We have some misgivings about McCann's death. Not suspicions, exactly, just misgivings. The timing is what bothers us."

"You mean, because it happened just after the strike?"

"That's it," I answered frankly.

He shook his head. "I wouldn't get too excited about that, if I were you," he said. "It wouldn't be the first time it's happened. A man makes the big strike after all, and he gets so excited he forgets himself for a minute and gets careless. And you only have to be careless once out here."

"That may be it," I said. I got to my feet, knowing I'd picked up all there was from this man. "Thanks a lot for your cooperation," I said.

"Any time," he said. He stood and shook hands with me.

I went back out through the chatting prospectors and crossed the echoing cavern that was level one, aiming to rent myself a scooter.

I DON'T like rockets. They're noisy as the dickens, they steer hard and drive erratically, and you can never carry what I would consider a safe emergency excess of fuel. Nothing like the big steady-g interplanetary liners. On those I feel almost human.

The appearance of the scooter I was shown at the rental agency didn't do much to raise my opinion of this mode of transportation. The thing was a good ten years old, the paint scraped and scratched all over its egg-shaped, originally green-colored body, and the windshield—a silly term, really, for the front window of a

craft that spends most of its time out where there isn't any wind—was scratched and pockmarked to the point of translucency by years of exposure to the asteroidal dust.

The rental agent was a sharp-nosed thin-faced type who displayed this refugee from a melting vat without a blush, and still didn't blush when he told me the charges. Twenty credits a day, plus fuel.

I paid without a murmur—it was the company's money, not mine—and paid an additional ten credits for the rental of a suit to go with it. I worked my way awkwardly into the suit, and clambered into the driver's seat of the relic. I attached the suit to the ship in all the necessary places, and the agent closed and spun the door.

Most of the black paint had worn off the handles of the controls, and insulation peeked through rips in the plastic siding here and there. I wondered if the thing had any slow leaks and supposed fatalistically that it had. The agent waved at me, stony-faced, the conveyor belt trundled me outside the dome, and I kicked the weary rocket into life.

The scooter had a tendency to roll to the right. If I hadn't kept fighting it back, it would have soon worked up a dandy little spin. I was spending so much

time juggling with the controls that I practically missed a couple of my beacon rocks, and that would have been just too bad. If I'd gotten off the course I had carefully outlined for myself, I'd never have found my bearings again, and I would have just floated around amid the scenery until some passerby took pity and towed me back home.

But I managed to avoid getting lost, which surprised me, and after four nerve-wracking hours I finally spotted the yellow-painted X of a registered claim on a half-mile thick chunk of rock dead ahead. As I got closer, I spied a scooter parked near the X, and beside it an inflated portable dome. The scooter was somewhat larger than mine, but no newer and probably even less safe. The dome was vari-colored, from repeated patching.

This would be the claim, and this is where I would find Karpin, sitting on his property while waiting for the sale to go through. Prospectors like Karpin are free-lance men, working for no particular company. They register their claims in their own names, and then sell the rights to whichever company shows up first with the most attractive offer. There's a lot of paperwork to such a sale, and it's all handled by the company. While waiting, the smart prospector sits on his claim and makes sure nobody

chips off a part of it for himself, a stunt that still happens now and again. It doesn't take too much concentrated explosive to make two rocks out of one rock, and a man's claim is only the rock with his X on it.

I set the scooter down next to the other one, and flicked the toggle for the air pumps, then put on the fishbowl and went

no viewports at all, so I wasn't sure Karpin was aware of my presence. I rapped my metal glove on the metal outer door of the lock, and then I was sure.

But it took him long enough to open up. I had just about decided he'd joined his partner in the long sleep when the door cracked open an inch. I pushed it open and stepped into the lock, duck-



about unattaching the suit from the ship. When the red light flashed on and off, I spun the door, opened it, and stepped out onto the rock, moving very cautiously. It isn't that I don't believe the magnets in the bootsoles will work, it's just that I know for a fact that they won't work if I happen to raise both feet at the same time.

I clumped across the crude X to Karpin's dome. The dome had

ing my head. The door was only five feet high, and just as wide as the lock itself, three feet. The other dimensions of the lock were: height, six feet six; width, one foot. Not exactly room to dance in.

When the red light high on the left-hand wall clicked off, I rapped on the inner door. It promptly opened, I stepped through and removed the fishbowl.

Karpin stood in the middle of the room, a small revolver in his hand. "Shut the door," he said.

I obeyed, moving slowly. I didn't want that gun to go off by mistake.

"Who are you?" Karpin demanded. The M&R man had been right. Ab Karpin was a dead ringer for all those other prospectors I'd seen back at Atronics City. Short and skinny and grizzled and ageless. He could have been forty, and he could have been ninety, but he was probably somewhere the other side of fifty. His hair was black and limp and thinning, ruffled in little wisps across his wrinkled pate. His forehead and cheeks were lined like a plowed field, and were much the same color. His eyes were wide apart and small, so deepset beneath shaggy brows that they seemed black. His mouth was thin, almost lipless. The hand holding the revolver was nothing but bones and blue veins covered with taut skin.

He was wearing a dirty undershirt and an old pair of trousers that had been cut off raggedly just above his knobby knees. Faded slippers were on his feet. He had good reason for dressing that way, the temperature inside the dome must have been nearly ninety degrees. The dome wasn't reflecting away the sun's heat as well as it had when it was young.

I looked at Karpin, and despite

the revolver and the tense expression on his face, he was the least dangerous-looking man I'd ever run across. All at once, the idea that this anti-social old geezer had the drive or the imagination to murder his partner seemed ridiculous.

Apparently, I spent too much time looking him over, because he said again, "Who are you?" And this time he motioned impatiently with the revolver.

"Stanton," I told him. "Ged Stanton, Tangiers Mutual Insurance. I have identification, but it's in my pants pocket, down inside this suit."

"Get it," he said. "And move slow."

"Right you are."

I moved slow, as per directions, and peeled out of the suit, then reached into my trouser pocket and took out my ID clip. I flipped it open and showed him the card bearing my signature and picture and right thumbprint and the name of the company I represented, and he nodded, satisfied, and tossed the revolver over onto his bed. "I got to be careful," he said. "I got a big claim here."

"I know that," I told him. "Congratulations for it."

"Thanks," he said, but he still looked peevish. "You're here about Jafe's insurance, right?"

"That I am."

"Don't want to pay up, I sup-

pose. That doesn't surprise me."

Blunt old men irritate me. "Well," I said, "we do have to investigate."

"Sure," he said. "You want some coffee?"

"Thank you."

"You can sit in that chair there. That was Jafe's."

I settled gingerly in the cloth-and-plastic foldaway chair he'd pointed at, and he went over to the kitchen area of the dome to start coffee. I took the opportunity to look the dome over. It was the first portable dome I'd ever been inside.

It was all one room, roughly circular, with a diameter of about fifteen feet. The sides went straight up for the first seven feet, then curved gradually inward to form the roof. At the center of the dome, the ceiling was about twelve feet high.

The floor of the room was simply the asteroidal rock surface, not completely level and smooth. There were two chairs and a table to the right of the entry lock, two foldaway cots around the wall beyond them, the kitchen area next and a cluttered storage area around on the other side. There was a heater standing alone in the center of the room, but it certainly wasn't needed now. Sweat was already trickling down the back of my neck and down my forehead into my eye-

brows. I peeled off my shirt and used it to wipe sweat from my face. "Warm in here," I said.

"You get used to it," he muttered, which I found hard to believe.

He brought over the coffee, and I tasted it. It was rotten, as bitter as this old hermit's soul, but I said, "Good coffee. Thanks a lot."

"I like it strong," he said.

I looked around at the room again. "All the comforts of home, eh? Pretty ingenious arrangement."

"Sure," he said sourly. "How about getting to the point, Mister?"

There's only one way to handle a blunt old man. Be blunt right back. "I'll tell you how it is," I said. "The company isn't accusing you of anything, but it has to be sure everything's on the up and up before it pays out any ten thousand credits. And your partner just happening to fill out that cash-return form just before he died—well, you've got to admit it is a funny kind of coincidence."

"How so?" He slurped coffee, and glowered at me over the cup. "We made this strike here," he said. "We knew it was the big one. Jafe had that insurance policy of his in case he never did make the big strike. As soon as we knew this was the big one, he said, 'I guess I don't need

that retirement now,' and sat right down and wrote out the cash-return. Then we opened a bottle of liquor and celebrated, and he got himself killed."

The way Karpin said it, it sounded smooth and natural. *Too* smooth and natural. "How did this accident happen anyway?" I asked him.

"I'm not one hundred per cent sure of that myself," he said. "I was pretty well drunk myself by that time. But he put on his suit and said he was going out to paint the X. He was falling all over himself, and I tried to tell him it could wait till we'd had some sleep, but he wouldn't pay any attention to me."

"So he went out," I said.

He nodded. "He went out first. After a couple minutes, I got lonesome in here, so I suited up and went out after him. It happened just as I was going out the lock, and I just barely got a glimpse of what happened."

He attacked the coffee again, noisily, and I prompted him, saying, "What did happen, Mister Karpin?"

"Well, he was capering around out there, waving the paint tube and such. There's a lot of sharp rock sticking out around here. just as I got outside, he lost his balance and kicked out, and scraped right into some of that rock, and punctured his suit."

"I thought the body was lost," I said.

He nodded. "It was. The last thing in life Jafe ever did was try to shove himself away from those rocks. That, and the force of air coming out of that puncture for the first second or two, was enough to throw him up off the surface. It threw him up too high, and he never got back down."

My doubt must have showed in my face, because he added, "Mister, there isn't enough gravity on this place to shoot craps with."

He was right. As we talked, I kept finding myself holding unnecessarily tight to the arms of the chair. I kept having the feeling I was going to float out of the chair and hover around up at the top of the dome if I were to let go. It was silly of course—there was *some* gravity on that planetoid, after all—but I just don't seem to get used to low-gee.

Nevertheless, I still had some more questions. "Didn't you try to get his body back? Couldn't you have reached him?"

"I tried to, Mister," he said. "Old Jafe McCann was my partner for fifteen years. But I was drunk, and that's a fact. And I was afraid to go jumping up in the air, for fear I'd go floating away, too."

"Frankly," I said, "I'm no expert on low gravity and aster-

oids. But wouldn't McCann's body just go into orbit around this rock? I mean, it wouldn't simply go floating off into space, would it?"

"It sure would," he said. "There's a lot of other rocks out here, too, Mister, and a lot of them are bigger than this one and have a lot more gravity pull. I don't suppose there's a navigator in the business who could have computed Jafe's course in advance. He floated up, and then he floated back over the dome here and seemed to hover for a couple minutes, and then he just floated out and away. His isn't the only body circling around the sun with all these rocks, you know."

I chewed a lip and thought it all over. I didn't know enough about asteroid gravity or the conditions out here to be able to say for sure whether Karpin's story was true or not. Up to this point, I couldn't attack the problem on a fact basis. I had to depend on *feeling* now, the hunches and instincts of eight years in this job, hearing some people tell lies and other people tell the truth.

And my instinct said Ab Karpin was lying in his teeth. That dramatic little touch about McCann's body hovering over the dome before disappearing into the void, that sounded more like the embellishment of fiction than

the circumstance of truth. And the string of coincidences were just too much. McCann just coincidentally happens to die right after he and his partner make their big strike. He happens to write out the cash-return form just before dying. And his body just happens to float away, so nobody can look at it and check Karpin's story.

But no matter what my instinct said, the story was smooth. It was smooth as glass, and there was no place for me to get a grip on it.

What now? There wasn't any hole in Karpin's story, at least none that I could see. I had to break his story somehow, and in order to do that I had to do some nosing around on this planetoid. I couldn't know in advance what I was looking for, I could only look. I'd know it when I found it. It would be something that conflicted with Karpin's story.

And for that, I had to be sure the story was complete. "You said McCann had gone out to paint the X," I said. "Did he paint it?"

Karpin shook his head. "He never got a chance. He spent all his time dancing, up till he went and killed himself."

"So you painted it yourself."

He nodded.

"And then you went on into Atronics City and registered

your elaim, is that the story?"

"No. Chemisant City was closer than Atronics City right then, so I went there. Just after Jafe's death, and everything—I didn't feel like being alone any more than I had to."

"You said Chemisant City was closer to you *then*," I said. "Isn't it now?"

"Things move around a lot out here, Mister," he said. "Right now, Chemisant City's almost twice as far from here as Atronics City. In about three days, it'll start swinging in closer again. Things keep shifting around out here."

"So I've noticed," I said. "When you took off to go to Chemisant City, didn't you make a try for your partner's body then?"

He shook his head. "He was long out of sight by then," he said. "That was ten, eleven hours later, when I took off."

"Why's that? All you had to do was paint the X and take off."

"Mister, I told you. I was drunk. I was falling down drunk, and when I saw I couldn't get at Jafe, and he was dead anyway, I came back in here and slept it off. Maybe if I'd been sober I would have taken the scooter and gone after him, but I was *drunk*."

"I see." And there just weren't any more questions I could think of to ask, not right now. So I said, "I've just had a shaky four-

hour ride coming out here. Mind if I stick around a while before going back?"

"Help yourself," he said, in a pretty poor attempt at genial hospitality. "You can sleep over, if you want."

"Fine," I said. "I think I'd like that."

"You wouldn't happen to play cribbage, would you?" he asked, with the first real sign of animation I'd seen in him yet.

"I learn fast," I told him.

"Okay," he said. "I'll teach you." And he produced a filthy deck of cards and taught me.

AFTER losing nine straight games of cribbage, I quit, and got to my feet. I was at my most casual as I stretched and said, "Okay if I wander around outside for a while? I've never been on an asteroid like this before. I mean, a little one like this. I've just been to the company cities up to now."

"Go right ahead," he said. "I've got some polishing and patching to do, anyway." He made his voice sound easy and innocent, but I noticed his eyes were alert and wary, watching me as I struggled back into my suit.

I didn't bother to put my shirt back on first, and that was a mistake. The temperature inside an atmosphere suit is a steady sixty-eight degrees. That had never

seemed particularly chilly before, but after the heat of that dome, it seemed cold as a blizzard inside the suit.

I went on out through the airlock, and moved as briskly as possible in the cumbersome suit, while the sweat chilled on my back and face, and I accepted the glum conviction that one thing I was going to get out of this trip for sure was a nasty head cold.

I went over to the X first, and stood looking at it. It was just an X, that's all, shakily scrawled in yellow paint, with the initials "J-A" scrawled much smaller beside it.

I left the X and clumped away. The horizon was practically at arm's length, so it didn't take long for the dome to be out of sight. And then I clumped more slowly, studying the surface of the asteroid.

What I was looking for was a grave. I believed that Karpin was lying, that he had murdered his partner. And I didn't believe that Jafe McCann's body had floated off into space. I was convinced that his body was still somewhere on this asteroid. Karpin had been forced to concoct a story about the body being lost because the appearance of the body would prove somehow that it had been murder and not accident. I was convinced of that, and now all I had to do was prove it.

But that asteroid was a pretty unlikely place for a grave. That wasn't dirt I was walking on, it was rock, solid metallic rock. You don't dig a grave in solid rock, not with a shovel. You maybe can do it with dynamite, but that won't work too well if your object is to keep anybody from seeing that the hole has been made. Dirt can be patted down. Blown-up rock looks like blown-up rock, and that's all there is to it.

I considered crevices and fissures in the surface, some cranny large enough for Karpin to have stuffed the body into. But I didn't find any of these either as I plodded along, being sure to keep one magnetted boot always in contact with the ground.

Karpin and McCann had set their dome up at just about the only really level spot on that entire planetoid. The rest of it was nothing but jagged rock, and it wasn't easy traveling at all, maneuvering around with magnets on my boots and a bulky atmosphere suit cramping my movements.

And then I stopped and looked out at space and cursed myself for a ring-tailed baboon. McCann's body might be anywhere in the Solar System, anywhere at all, but there was one place I could be sure it wasn't, and that place was this asteroid. No, Karpin had not blown a

grave or stuffed the body into a fissure in the ground. Why not? Because this chunk of rock was valuable, that's why not. Because Karpin was in the process of selling it to one of the major companies, and that company would come along and chop this chunk of rock to pieces, getting the valuable metal out, and McCann's body would turn up in the first week of operations if Karpin were stupid enough to bury it here.

Ten hours between McCann's death and Karpin's departure for Chemisant City. He'd admitted that already. And I was willing to bet he'd spent at least part of that time carrying McCann's body to some other asteroid, one he was sure was nothing but worthless rock. If that were true, it meant the mortal remains of Jafe McCann were now somewhere—*anywhere*—in the Asteroid Belt. Even if I assumed that the body had been hidden on an asteroid somewhere between here and Chemisant City—which wasn't necessarily so—that wouldn't help at all. The relative positions of planetoids in the Belt just keep on shifting. A small chunk of rock that was between here and Chemisant City a few weeks ago—it could be almost anywhere in the Belt right now.

The body, that was the main item. I'd more or less counted on finding it somehow. At the mo-

ment, I couldn't think of any other angle for attacking Karpin's story.

As I clopped morosely back to the dome, I nibbled at Karpin's story in my mind. For instance, why go to Chemisant City? It was closer, he said, but it couldn't have been closer by more than a couple of hours. The way I understood it, Karpin was well-known back on Atronics City—it was the normal base of operations for he and his partner—and he didn't know a soul at Chemisant City. Did it make sense for him to go somewhere he wasn't known after his partner's death, even if it *was* an hour closer? No, it made a lot more sense for a man in that situation to go where he's known, go someplace where he has friends who'll sympathize with him and help him over the shock of losing a partner of fifteen years' standing, even if going there does mean traveling an hour longer.

And there was always the cash-return form. That was what I was here about in the first place. It just didn't make sense for McCann to have held up his celebration while he filled out a form that he wouldn't be able to mail until he got back to Atronics City. And yet the company's handwriting experts were convinced that it wasn't a forgery, and I could pretty well take their word for it.

Mulling these things over as I tramped back toward the dome, I suddenly heard a distant bell ringing way back in my head. The glimmering of an idea, not an idea yet but just the hint of one. I wasn't sure where it led, or even if it led anywhere at all, but I was going to find out.

KARPIN opened the doors for me. By the time I'd stripped off the suit he was back to work. He was cleaning the single unit which was his combination stove and refrigerator and sink and garbage disposal.

I looked around the dome again, and I had to admit that a lot of ingenuity had gone into the manufacture and design of this dome and its contents. The dome itself, when deflated, folded down into an oblong box three feet by one foot by one foot. The lock itself, of course, folded separately, into another box somewhat smaller than that.

As for the gear inside the dome, it was functional and collapsible, and there wasn't a single item there that wasn't needed. There were the two chairs and the two cots and the table, all of them foldaway. There was that fantastic combination job Karpin was cleaning right now, and that had dimensions of four feet by three feet by three feet. The clutter of gear over to the left wasn't as much of a clutter as it

looked. There was a Geiger counter, an automatic spectrograph, two atmosphere suits, a torsion densiometer, a core-cutting drill, a few small hammers and picks, two spare air tanks, boxes of food concentrate, a paint tube, a doorless jimmy-john and two small metal boxes about eight inches cube. These last were undoubtedly Karpin's and McCann's pouches, where they kept whatever letters, money, address books or other small bits of possessions they owned. Back of this mound of gear, against the wall, stood the air reconditioner, humming quietly to itself.

In this small enclosed space there was everything a man needed to keep himself alive. Everything except human company. And if you didn't need human company, then you had everything. Just on the other side of that dome, there was a million miles of death, in a million possible ways. On this side of the dome, life was cozy, if somewhat Spartan and very hot.

I knew for sure I was going to get a head cold. My body had adjusted to the sixty-eight degrees inside the suit, finally, and now was very annoyed to find the temperature shooting up to ninety again.

Since Karpin didn't seem inclined to talk, and I would rather spend my time thinking than talking anyway, I took a hint

from him and did some cleaning. I'd noticed a smeared spot about nose-level on the faceplate of my fishbowl, and now was as good a time as any to get rid of it. It had a tendency to make my eyes cross.

My shirt was sodden and wrinkled by this time anyway, having first been used to wipe sweat from my face and later been rolled into a ball and left on the chair when I went outside, so I used it for a cleaning rag, buffing like mad the silvered surface of the faceplate. Faceplates are silvered, not so the man inside can look out and no one else can look in, but in order to keep some of the more violent rays of the sun from getting through to the face.

I buffed for a while, and then I put the fishbowl on my head and looked through it. The spot was gone, so I went over and re-attached it to the rest of the suit, and then settled back in my chair again and lit a cigarette.

Karpin spoke up. "Wish you wouldn't smoke. Makes it tough on the conditioner."

"Oh," I said. "Sorry." So I just sat, thinking morosely about non-forged cash-return forms, and coincidences, and likely spots to hide a body in the Asteroid Belt.

Where would one dispose of a body in the asteroids? I went back through my thinking on

that topic, and I found holes big enough to drive Karpin's claim through. This idea of leaving the body on some worthless chunk of rock, for instance. If Karpin had killed his partner—and I was dead sure he had—he'd planned it carefully and he wouldn't be leaving anything to chance. Now, an asteroid isn't worthless to a prospector until that prospector has landed on it and tested it. *Karpin* might know that such-and-such an asteroid was nothing but worthless stone, but the guy who stops there and finds McCann's body might *not* know it.

No, Karpin wouldn't leave that to chance. He would get rid of that body, and he would do it in such a way that nobody would *ever* find it.

How? Not by leaving it on a worthless asteroid, and not by just pushing it off into space. The distance between asteroids is large, but so's the travel. McCann's body, floating around in the blackness, might just be found by somebody.

And that, so far as I could see, eliminated the possibilities. McCann's body was in the Belt. I'd eliminated both the asteroids themselves and the space around the asteroids as hiding places. What was left?

The sun, of course.

I thought that over for a while, rather surprised at myself for having noticed the possibil-

ity. Now, let's say Karpin attaches a small rocket to McCann's body, stuffed into its atmosphere suit. He sets the rocket going, and off goes McCann. Not that he aims it toward the sun, that wouldn't work well at all. Instead of falling into the sun, the body would simply take up a long elliptical orbit *around* the sun, and would come back to the asteroids every few hundred years. No, he would aim McCann *back*, in the direction opposite to the direction or rotation of the asteroids. He would, in essence, slow McCann's body down, make it practically stop in relation to the motion of the asteroids. And then it would simply *fall* into the sun.

None of my ideas, it seemed, were happy ones. If McCann's body were even at this moment falling toward the sun, it was just as useful to me as if it were on some other asteroid.

But, wait a second. Karpin and McCann had worked with the minimum of equipment, I'd already noticed that. They didn't have extras of anything, and they certainly wouldn't have extra rockets. Except for one fast trip to Chemisant City—when he had neither the time nor the excuse to buy a jato rocket—Karpin had spent all of his time since McCann's death right here on this planetoid.

So that killed that idea.

While I was hunting around for some other idea, Karpin spoke up again, for the first time in maybe twenty minutes. "You think I killed him, don't you?" he said, not looking around from his cleaning job.

I considered my answer. There was no reason at all to be overly polite to this sour old buzzard, but at the same time I am naturally the soft-spoken type. "We aren't sure," I said. "We just think there are some odd items to be explained."

"Such as what?" he demanded.

"Such as the timing of McCann's cash-return form."

"I already explained that," he said.

"I know. You've explained everything."

"He wrote it out himself," the old man insisted. He put down his cleaning cloth, and turned to face me. "I suppose your company checked the handwriting already, and Jafe McCann is the one who wrote that form."

He was so blasted sure of himself. "It would seem that way," I said.

"What other odd items you worried about?" he asked me, in a rusty attempt at sarcasm.

"Well," I said, "there's this business of going to Chemisant City. It would have made more sense for you to go to Atronics City, where you were known."

"Chemisant was closer," he

said. He shook a finger at me. "That company of yours thinks it can cheat me out of my money," he said. "Well, it can't. I know my rights. That money belongs to me."

"I guess you're doing pretty well without McCann," I said.

His angry expression was replaced by one of bewilderment. "What do you mean?"

"They told me back at Atronics City," I explained, "that McCann was the money expert and you were the metals expert, and that's why McCann handled all your buying on credit and stuff like that. Looks as though you've got a pretty keen eye for money yourself."

"I know what's mine," he mumbled, and turned away. He went back to scrubbing the stove coils again.

I stared at his back. Something had happened just then, and I wasn't sure what. He'd just been starting to warm up to a tirade against the dirty insurance company, and all of a sudden he'd folded up and shut up like a clam.

And then I saw it. Or at least I saw part of it. I saw how that cash-return form fit in, and how it made perfect sense.

Now, all I needed was proof of murder. Preferably a body. I had the rest of it. Then I could pack the old geezer back to Atronics City and get proof for the part I'd already figured out.

I'd like that. I'd like getting back to Atronics City, and having this all straightened out, and then taking the very next liner straight back to Earth. More immediately, I'd like getting out of this heat and back into the cool sixty-eight degrees of—

And then it hit me. The whole thing hit me, and I just sat there and stared. They did not carry extras, Karpin and McCann, they did not carry one item of equipment more than they needed.

I sat there and looked at the place where the dead body was hidden, and I said, "Well, I'll be a son of a gun!"

He turned and looked at me, and then he followed the direction of my gaze, and he saw what I was staring at, and he made a jump across the room at the revolver lying on the cot.

That's what saved me. He moved too fast, jerked his muscles too hard, and went sailing up and over the cot and ricocheted off the dome wall. And that gave me plenty of time to get up from the chair, moving more cautiously than he had, and get my hands on the revolver before he could get himself squared away again.

I straightened with the gun in my hand and looked into a face white with frustration and rage. "Okay, Mister McCann," I said. "It's all over."

He knew I had him, but he tried not to show it. "What are you talking about? McCann's dead."

"Sure he is," I said. "Jafe McCann was the money-minded part of the team. He was the one who signed for all the loans and all the equipment bought on credit. With this big strike in, Jafe McCann was the one who'd have to pay all that money."

"You're babbling," he snapped, but the words were hollow.

"You weren't satisfied with half a loaf," I said. "You should have been. Half a loaf is better than none. But you wanted every penny you could get your hands on, and you wanted to pay out just as little money as you possibly could. So when you killed Ab Karpin, you saw a way to kill your debts as well. You'd *become* Ab Karpin, and it would be Jafe McCann who was dead, and the debts dead with him."

"That's a lie," he said, his voice getting shrill. "*I'm* Ab Karpin, and I've got papers to prove it."

"Sure. Papers you stole from a dead man. And you might have gotten away with it, too. But you just couldn't leave well enough alone, could you? Not satisfied with having the whole claim to yourself, you switched identities with your victim to avoid your debts. And not satisfied with *that*, you filled out a cash-return

form and tried to collect your money as your own heir. *That's* why you had to go to Chemisant City, where nobody would recognize Ab Karpin or Jafe McCann, rather than to Atronics City where you were well-known."

You don't want to make too many wild accusations," he shouted, his voice shaking. "You don't want to go around accusing people of things you can't prove."

"I can prove it," I told him. "I can prove everything I've said. As to who you are, there's no problem. All I have to do is bring you back to Atronics City. There'll be plenty of people there to identify you. And as to proving you murdered Ab Karpin, I think his body will be proof enough, don't you?"

McCann watched me as I backed slowly around the room to the mound of gear. The partners had had no extra equipment, no extra equipment at all. I looked down at the two atmosphere suits lying side by side on the metallic rock floor.

Two atmosphere suits. The dead man was supposed to be in one of those, floating out in space somewhere. He was in the suit, right enough, I was sure of that, but he wasn't floating anywhere.

A space suit is a perfect place to hide a body, for as long as it has to be hid. The silvered faceplate keeps you from seeing in-

side, and the suit is, naturally, a sealed atmosphere. A body can rot away to ashes inside a space suit, and you'll never notice a thing on the outside.

I'd had the right idea after all. McCann had planned to get rid of Karpin's body by attaching a rocket to it, slowing it down, and letting it fall into the sun. But he hadn't had an opportunity yet to go buy a rocket. He couldn't go to Atronics City, where he could have bought the rocket on credit, and he couldn't go to Chemisant City until the claim sale went through and he had some money to spend. And in the meantime, Karpin's body was perfectly safe, sealed away inside his atmosphere suit.

And it would have been safe, too, if McCann hadn't been just a little bit too greedy. He could kill his partner and get away with it; policemen on the Belt are even farther apart than the asteroids. He could swindle his creditors and get away with it; they had no way of checking up and no reason to suspect a switch in identities. But when he tried to get his own money back from Tangiers Mutual Insurance; *that's* when he made his mistake.

I studied the two atmosphere suits, at the same time managing to keep a wary eye on Jafe McCann, standing rigid and silent across the room. Which one of

those suits contained the body of Ab Karpin?

The one with the new patch on the chest, of course. As I'd guessed, McCann had shot him, and that's why he had the problem of disposing of the body in the first place.

I prodded that suit with my toe. "He's in there, isn't he?"

"You're crazy."

"Think I should open it up and check? It's been almost a month, you know. I imagine he's pretty ripe by now."

I reached down to the neck-fastenings on the fishbowl, and McCann finally moved. His arms jerked up, and he cried, "Don't! He's in there, he's in there! For God's sake, don't open it up!"

I relaxed. Mission accomplished. "Crawl into your suit, little man," I said. "We've got ourselves a trip to make, the three of us."

Henderson, as usual, was jovial but stern. "You did a fine job up there, Ged," he said, with false familiarity. "Really brilliant work."

"Thank you very much," I said. I was holding the last piece of news for a minute or two, relishing it.

"But you brought McCann in over a week ago. I don't see why you had to stay up at Atronics City at all after that, much less ten days."

I sat back in the chair and negligently crossed my legs. "I just thought I'd take a little vacation," I said carelessly, and lit a cigarette. I flicked ashes in the general direction of the ashtray on Henderson's desk. Some of them made it.

"A vacation?" he echoed, eyes widening. Henderson was a company man, a *real* company man. A vacation for him was purgatory, it was separation from a loved one. "I don't believe you have a vacation coming," he said frostily, "for at least six months."

"That's what you think, Henry," I said.

All he could do at that was blink.

I went on, enjoying myself hugely. "I don't like this company," I said. "And I don't like this job. And I don't like you. And from now on, I've decided, it's going to be vacation all the time."

"Ged," he said, his voice faint, "what's the matter with you? Don't you feel well?"

"I feel well," I told him. "I feel

fine. Now, I'll tell you why I spent an extra ten days at Atronics City. McCann made and registered the big strike, right?"

Henderson nodded blankly, apparently not trusting himself to speak.

"Wrong," I said cheerfully. "McCann went to Chemisant City and filled out all the forms required for registering a claim. But every place he was supposed to sign his name he wrote *Ab Karpin* instead. Jafe McCann *never did make a legal registration of his claim.*"

Henderson just looked fish-eyed.

"So," I went on, "as soon as I turned McCann over to the law at Atronics City, I went and registered that claim myself. And then I waited around for ten days until the company finished the paperwork involved in buying that claim from me. And then I came straight back here, just to say goodbye to you. Wasn't that nice?"

He didn't move.

"Goodbye," I said.

THE END





Political

By JOHN JAKES

Illustrated by FINLAY

Machine

What does it profit a man to gain high office if, in so doing, he loses what may pass for his soul? What does it profit a nation that sacrifices the old virtues (and vices) for the new virtues (and de-vices)?

FIVE in the morning, EDT, with a spongy-wet tidewater wind pushing at the limp draper-

ies of the Illinois Suite. In the gloom a bell rang; a lucite square turned pearl on one wall.

The Populist Custodian from Illinois, the Honorable Elwood Everett Swigg sat up in bed like a mechanical man. His eyes flew open. Jagged streaks flashed across the lucite screen. Custodian Swigg staggered to his feet. His flannelette nightshirt clung sweatily to his body. Locks of silver-gray hair fell across his impressive forehead. With groggy grandeur he raised a finger in the air.

"Perils beset us on every hand," he said to the chest of drawers. "All around, we are ringed by encircling enemies. Therefore, friends and neighbors, I say that this is no time to reward faith with a lack of faith, to repay dutiful service with a kick in the hindquarters, as my uncle Elmer used to say on the farm down in—"

"God damn it, operator," said a floating face on the lucite screen, "I said no *bells*."

The face focused: egg-like in its absence of hair, but deeply lined, as though dipped in acid over a long period. Which, in a way, it had been. From behind his glasses, Buster Poole, so-called hatchetman of the Illinois Populists, peered into the Washington dawn from his atomic hideaway at Starved Rock, hundreds of miles distant.

"Elwood, where are you? Come over here. God damn these operators any—"

"I am terribly sorree, sir, terribly sorree, and I promise—"

"—so when it's time to make your decision in November, folks, remember—"

In exasperation Buster Poole said: "The quick brown fox."

Elwood Everett Swigg blinked, lowered his finger. "You call me, Buster?"

"You bet your sweet cells I did. Get over here where I can see you."

"I was having a most peculiar dream."

"That operator's going to have a few when I report her."

Elwood fumbled with a humidor, lit an expensive cigar and rolled his shoulders back. He was a tall figure, slightly stooped, with a craggy, heroic face and a voice with molasses and thunder in it. "What seems to be the trouble, Buster?"

"Jay Milton Mossman's the trouble."

"That upstart? That Sociocratic slug?" Elwood's laugh was rich with the disdain of the veteran campaigner for the untried novice. "Why, he's only thirty-two."

"Be that as it may," Buster Poole snarled, "he's been awake for the last three nights, talking to people around the clock. Tuesday, Hereford Creek. Wednesday, Brompton's Falls. Last night at Indian Dune. All I can say,



Elwood, is that you'd better shag your carcass back here and get busy. We've got eight weeks to election. If this upstart, as you call him, wins your Custodial seat, you know where you'll wind up."

"Hold on a second, Buster." Elwood clasped his hands behind his nightshirt, smoke wreathing his head. He frowned as though deliberating. Wisdom personified.

"Don't 'hold on' me, you old fool."

"Buster, that's hardly the tone to take with one who has served so—"

"Yeah, but unless you serve the party a little better than you've been serving it so far, Mr. Jay Milton Mossman's going to be State Custodian come January. And I repeat, if that happens to me, you know what happens to you."

A somewhat-undressed young woman peered imploringly into the scene behind Buster. "Not now, Dolly. Elwood, you shag yourself to the turboport. You've got a reservation on the noon Hustler direct to Indian Dune. You're going to debate with Mossman tonight."

"Debate?" Elwood's eyes popped in disbelief. "Tonight? Debate what?"

Buster opened a bag of peanuts and gobbled several. "The Populist Stewardship And Why It Must Be Retained."

"I'm not prepared—"

"Shut up. Doc Radameyer's got the tapes ready."

A cadaverous, inward-turning sort of fellow floated into the screen, sucking on a pineapple drop. "This is correct," he said in a pale voice, and floated out again.

"Elwood, don't you have an inkling of the seriousness of the situation?" Buster asked.

With studied and theatrical elegance reminiscent of a Grand-er, Older Age, Elwood tapped an eighth-inch ash from the end of his glowing cigar. "You must be misinformed. Mossman could not possibly have remained awake three nights running. The public could smell a figurative rat, my boy, if it were true. Which is patently impossible, the laws being what they are."

"It's just a state commission decree, remember," Buster snarled. "Even if it is in all fifty-two."

"Are you certain about Mossman? Were you on the scene?"

"Elwood, don't sneer at me or I'll turn Radameyer loose on you."

From off-screen came a sepulchral voice: "Not just now, please." Plus the sucking of a pineapple drop and a shrill giggle.

Elwood frowned, then scowled—a perfect imitation of middle-

western moralism facing the decay of personal ethics. Buster Poole stood up. He began to pace in front of his lead-brick fireplace. The camera had trouble following him.

"Elwood, unless you're on that flight—"

"Three nights?" Elwood murmured. "Impossible."

"You've seen Mossman. He's young-looking. Vigorous."

"An appearance of boyish charm is no substitute for experience when it comes—"

"Oh, shut up, shut up. As I said, he's either a young man or —"

"An illegal model?" For the first time, Elwood sounded slightly alarmed. "That's—inconceivable. Have you checked? I mean, my boy, the commissioner—"

"I've talked enough, I'm sick of talking!" Buster shouted. "You be here today!"

"But I have my duty, Buster. This is the height of the Tourist Session, and—"

All at once Buster Poole's right hand seemed to leap out from his body, fisted, until it filled the screen. At the last second the camera pulled its zoomar. Buster's whole body shot into the background, miniaturizing to a spot. The screen blacked out.

FOR a long moment Elwood Everett Swigg did nothing

but stare at the end of his cigar. Then he turned and pushed through the damp curtains to the tiny balcony overlooking the parking lot and Rock Creek Bridge. Against the dim hot dawn the traffic bullseyes stood out scarlet and green.

A sac in the corner of each of Elwood's eyes disgorged a glycerine tear. He picked up the hem of his nightshirt and dabbed at the gooey stuff. Then he turned and tottered back into his suite on spindly legs.

Much of what Buster Poole had told him had now begun to be absorbed into the cells of his sixty-year-old head. An expression of concern, even alarm, wrinkled his Olympian brow. This expression had not completely vanished when he hustled into the Shoreham lobby precisely at eight that morning, the solid silver head of his anachronistic walking stick winking richly.

Elwood wore his conventional costume—frock tunic, morning shorts and dickey with stickpin. All over the lobby young government clerks in various shades of gray shorts hustled to conferences with dispatch cases under their arms. Elwood tramped ahead briskly. He nodded to Murfree, the Sociocratic Custodian from Mississippi, who merely curled his fist more tightly about the bullwhip he always carried, and stalked on.

Near the lobby entrance a crowd of two dozen children in electric blue shorts, jumpers and beanies began to leap up and down and squeal. Two elderly women attempted to quiet them, uselessly. Several of the tots hoisted up a lopsided banner. It read:

Illinois Powwow No. 478

Kiddee Kampers of
America Says

HELLO CUSTODIAN SWIGG!

Elwood stopped. He bowed formally, swept a palm over his mop of silver hair and flashed his famous smile.

"Good morning, Kiddie Kampers. Your Custodian welcomes you to Washington."

The two elderly ladies fumbled with lacy fichus at the collars of their sensible tunics. They nudged one another forward and introduced themselves as the leaders of the group, the Misses Teasdale and Hipp. Miss Hipp seemed unable to do much besides simper. But Miss Teasdale said it was simply thrilling for all the Kiddee Kampers to be able to view with their own tiny eyes the great legislative process taking place day and night on the floor of the Combined Congress.

"As your state Custodian," Elwood said, employing several theatrical gestures, "it is my pleasure to conduct you personally to the Illinois machine,

which it is my privilege and duty, as your elected steward, to maintain and service in tiptop working order during my term as—"

"Pa says they ain't nothing but janitors," said a male Kiddee Kamper.

"Is your papa a Sociocrat, sonny?" Elwood said. Squeals of insane laughter convulsed the group, including Miss Hipp. Elwood's face instantly grew serious.

"Actually, sonny, one must not joke about the sacred responsibilities of the Custodians. Without their services the great and intelligent body which governs us would be unable to function effectively day and night, passing into the law of the land those rules which make this country a better place for one and all to live.

"(Step this way, kiddies. The chartered turbobus is waiting.) Of course, in our state—" (An indulgent glance at the Misses Teasdale and Hipp.) "—certain parties would have us believe that only youth can supply the knowledge and initiative to properly program our machine, whereas it is my deep and sincere conviction that only wisdom, garnered through four successful terms—"

The Kiddee Kampers continued to squeal and giggle as the group moiled out of the hotel

and into the turbobus. Between the chilled temperature-control of the lobby and that of the bus Misses Teasdale and Hipp erupted into cascades of sweat. Elwood remained dry and cool, his silver-headed cane winking.

The turbobus shot up the causeway under the traffic bulls-eye. Elwood delivered his little lecture on the traditions of history which are the country's heritage, etc. etc., while gazing out the window at the busy scenes of early-morning Washington. A large Hustler travel poster shot by. It reminded him of Buster.

What should he do?

His head sorted the choices. Certainly he would not go back. He knew his duty. His duty had been taught to him most carefully, made a part of his very existence. He would not abandon it.

Thus, leonine and magnificent in the flashing sunlight, Elwood continued his lecture all the way to the Combined Congressional Building, grandly ignoring the few snide remarks and soft-drink envelopes thrown by Kid-dee Kampers whose parents were obviously non-Populist.

It took two hours to conduct the group through just a fraction of the laboratories and control rooms buried beneath the Building, what with Elwood stopping every so often to pull open a wall panel and reveal

miles of cable receding into the distance, or vast networks of pinpoint lights flashing on great boards behind thick glass walls. Since the Tourist Session was indeed at its peak, there were innumerable waits for lift tubes and floating stairways as other tourist delegations—Elks, Shriners, Girl Patriots, Non-Nuclear-ites, Birth Control Brigaders and the like—went through similar tours under the guidance of their own state Custodians. Shortly before eleven, however, the electric moment arrived.

With a finger to his lips and an expression of deep reverence on his face, Elwood turned his back on the Kiddee Kampers. He threw wide his arms and opened the double doors into the Chamber.

DWARFED by the immense steel cases which towered three stories each, Elwood's group started down a long sloping walkway which, with the other walkways that were arranged like wheel-spokes, converged at the bottom of the bowl-like chamber before the dais where sat the Chairman-Printer.

"Ssssh!" Elwood breathed. "A bill has just been passed. See, it's coming out on the tape and going down the chute to the typesetter's. Let's see."

Elwood consulted one of the illuminated globes set at inter-

vals along the walk. "P. L. Three-billion and nine, Retroactivity of Social Security Psycho-Happiness Credits During Odd Months. A most significant bill," he added, although the Kiddee Kampers were far too awestruck by the mammoth machines and the flickering lights to reply, facetiously or otherwise.

At last Elwood paused beside one of the larger machines. He placed his palm against its smoothly humming metallic side. Over his head a small engraved stainless steel plate read:

Illinois

(IBM)

"This is your computer, children. More perfect, more wise and fair than the most intelligent mortal representative could hope to be. It guarantees you perfect representation without emotion. Feel thankful, children, that you live in an America where the antiquated tradition of representation by human beings is recognized for what it is—disastrous, and impossible, I might add, in the light of the complexity of our world. However—" Elwood cleared his throat. "Under our democratic system we must, of course, guarantee representation to all. Therefore your parents have duly elected me State Custodian. I shall now give a brief demonstration of my duties."

The great chronometer at the north end of the chamber showed

a few minutes past eleven. Elwood took out a silver key, unlocked a small panel in the computer's side and occupied himself for the next five minutes with the thoroughly spurious demonstration regularly given for tourists. He applied oil from an antique can to several false holes in the interior of a special non-functioning cavity in the computer's side. The oil can made little squirting sounds. These held the Kiddee Kampers, Misses Teasdale and Hipp spellbound, allowing Elwood to do a little electioneering:

"I have a message for you children before you leave. Next November, your parents will be asked to choose between Custodial experience and Custodial callowness, between—"

A pale figure stepped out from behind the Iowa computer, sucking a pineapple drop.

"I thought so," said Dr. Radameyer with a sigh. He was still rumpled from his quick Hustler trip from Starved Rock. Over the heads of the Kiddee Kampers Dr. Radameyer stared with highly magnified eyes at Elwood. "Oh, Elwood."

"Yes? Who—Radameyer! Now Doctor, I made my position clear to Poole—"

"Phooey," said Radameyer tiredly. "I told him you wouldn't cooperate. Oh, well." Another pineapple drop. "Don't sit under

the apple tree with anyone else but me."

Elwood collapsed against the side of the computer, his face screwed up in pain.

"Custodian Swigg!" shrieked Miss Teasdale. "Why are you clutching your side?"

Radameyer floated forward. He made a cursory examination of Elwood, who was now stretched out on the walkway, groaning horribly. "I'm afraid some elements have fused." Radameyer knelt down and turned up Elwood's eyelid, disclosing a milky pupil. "The rest of the tour will have to be cancelled. Please wait in the rotunda for further word of the Custodian's condition."

Little faces no longer smiling, the Kiddee Kampers milled out of the Chamber. When the mammoth doors had swung shut Radameyer poked Elwood in the rib cage.

"Quick brown fox, Elwood old boy. Get up. We've forty minutes to make the Hustler."

Elwood blinked and followed the doctor up the aisle, all trace of pain gone from his face.

"Was that necessary, Doctor?"

Radameyer shrugged. "Poole wants the election. You're paying too much attention to your duty program. We'll have to have a checkup after the debate tonight." He patted a bulging pocket. "All the debate tapes are

in here. We can feed them on the flight. A lot of interesting stuff, actually."

Radameyer guided Elwood toward the underground monorail entrance, used only by Custodians. The Kiddee Kampers would just have to stand waiting and wondering.

"Written by one of the best boxes in the business," Radameyer went on. "Normally does women's novels. When that last box of yours blew up from resistor fatigue, we had to scratch. Luckily we hit it successful at the first auction. Come on, Elwood, pick up your feet. Do you want 'Don't sit—?' " Radameyer paused deliberately, unwrapping some new pineapple drops.

"No, no, I'll come along. I see it's serious now. I'll be glad to debate. Glad to, my boy, glad to, glad to."

"That sounds more encouraging," said Radameyer as they descended through the cool caverns to the whistling monorail track. "Maybe we won't have to re-program after all."

THE HUSTLER pierced the sky in a burst of silent white flame. Within an hour Custodian Elwood Swigg and Dr. Radameyer were inside a sun-heated tent erected for the rally on the steep bluffs over the Mississippi, just outside the little lead-mining community of Indian Dune.

The tent swarmed with members of the Populist state committee. Tickers chattered. Pitchers of lemonade were constantly emptied and refilled. A corps of the Ladies Auxillary was busy preparing pitchpine torches. ("Not my idea," Buster Poole scowled, sweaty and in shirt-sleeves at a deal table behind a mound of memoranda. "Has something to do with one of the old Presidents that came from the state. Mossman thought of it. Or rather, Hawk. Pioneer spirit. Fresh blood. Etcetera. Makes me puke. Wait a sec, Elwood.")

Dr. Radameyer, holding firmly to Elwood's elbow, found himself overwhelmed at the collection of antique appurtenances freighted in for the rally—ancient telephones, for example. Buster Poole was talking into one, arranging for six turbobusloads of rallyers. These would arrive, rally and demonstrate, one hundred a head, noisemakers and torches to be provided by the state committee.

Elwood picked up a handbill printed on a curious stuff. "Look at this."

Dr. Radameyer felt it. "My God. Real primitive paper."

Glancing down the list headed *Programme*, Elwood frowned.

"I wish I could talk to Buster a minute. This sounds like a program I should have arranged.

Instead, I seem to have been forced to go along with what the opposition has set up." Immediately Elwood's tear sacs opened. He read the paper handbill aloud, large glycerine drops staining it like dark flowers: "Masson's Original Equestrian Troupe, Including Genuine Horses In Person. Lady Olivia on the Taut Wire. The Coal Valley Family Bell-Ringers."

"Bell-ringers?" Radameyer grabbed the handbill. "Let me see that."

Buster Poole rushed up. "Know the speeches, Elwood?"

"Of course. Not precisely my style, but—"

"What a mess, what a miserable mess," Buster said vehemently. "Every act for miles is booked. We haven't got one lousy item on the program that says Courtesy State Populist Party. Oh, I tell you, Radameyer, this Mossman is a grand one. Youthful, healthy, vigorous."

"We'll have to do something about those bell-ringers, Buster," Radameyer said. "That's one trigger-error I've never been able to trace and correct."

"I know," Buster said. He shouted: "Charlie—remind me to memorize that Hawk crumb as soon as I get finished conferring with the Custodian."

He shoved Elwood, who was still dry and calm amidst the

sweating crowds in the non-chilled tent, over to an entrance-way. Buster lifted a corner of the moldy-smelling canvas. He pointed across to the edge of the bluff. Next to a pine-plank platform being hastily erected could be seen a small tent city, flag-festooned with the emblems of the Sociocrats. From the highest point of the biggest tent floated a huge dimensional styrene statue-balloon of the Sociocratic candidate, Jay Milton Mossman.

"You've got to turn on the charm, Elwood," Buster said. "You can get an idea of their organization. Out of nowhere, bang, they dig up this Mossman, and load him with gimmicks like this pioneer routine. Then they box us into accepting the debate, with only ten minutes' talk about ground-rules. Next you waste half a day responding to your God damn duty program—" Poole waved aside Radameyer's mild protests that it wasn't really Elwood's fault. "—so now I'll lay it on the line to you, Custodian. You either get out there and win this crowd tonight, ooze them to death with your so-called charm, or you know what'll happen."

Elwood drew himself up to his full, rather regal height. "I know very well. You have taught me that most expressly."

"He can only do so much," Radameyer said.

"But he can do less than the most, if he wants," Buster snarled back.

"I revere and venerate my position as Custodian," Elwood said. "I shall give it full measure during the debate. However, I should like to ask one question. Have you ascertained anything about the nature of this Mossman? After all, it's quite a departure. Young. Handsome. Rather smart-alecky, if you wish my opinion."

"Times are changing," was all Buster would say. "In a minute, Charlie."

"Ah, yes, but when the computers replaced the representatives, and the non-humans subsequently replaced the human Custodians—experimentally at first, then on a permanent basis—it was thought psychologically correct to mold and model Custodial candidates in the fashion which would most perfectly appeal to the greatest number of voters."

As he spoke, Elwood did not respond emotionally to the fact that had been clearly taught him long ago: that non-humans were first employed in Custodial positions because the Custodial position was essentially a useless, harmless job. Except as it provided the voters with the satisfaction of electing somebody or something, once human beings

became inadequate to fulfill legislative responsibilities. Further, the Custodial position kept the national party alive—perhaps the real reason non-humans had been tested and used first in this particular role. But Elwood's makeup didn't permit him to weep solely because he was useless. Though he knew, as a fact, that he was, he was so arranged as to act in the opposite fashion—for the benefit of the people, especially during the Tourist Session. This sense of purpose rang in Elwood's voice as he went on:

"Window dressing, you call it. Yet I have seen the sparkle in the eyes of a crowd when I pass among them." There was no smile on Elwood's face as he said this. Only a great solemnity. He brushed at his heroic silver locks and took a firmer grip on the head of his cane. "In fact, we discussed this morning the state commission decrees which require non-humans to be cast in human mold—sleeping, eating and so forth, so as not to effect too rapid a transition that would psychically upset the populace. This raises the question of Mossman's—"

"I don't know, I just don't know yet," Buster Poole interrupted, wiping sweat. "You just hang around, Elwood. I may want to talk to you some more."

Buster dashed off: "Ready to

memorize, Charlie? Right. To Andy Hawk, Sociocratic Headquarters. Subject—bell-ringers. The one weak point in our candidate's programming is an uncontrolled circuit closure triggered by a bell stimulus." Poole paced, sneering at the invisible recipient of the memo as he talked. "Out of consideration for the way in which you have managed to pre-arrange this debate—and out of simple decency—" Poole grinned at his own cleverness. "—I would appreciate it if the Coal Valley Family Bell-Ringers could be struck from the program. I repeat, Andy, the bells represent the one point of disorganization peculiar to our model. Rest assured, that should a situation arise in which any action of ours should produce a disorderly reaction in your candidate—(That ought to trap him into telling us about Mossman, one way or another, eh, Charlie?)—I would take quick steps to remove that stimulus. You well know that, due to the complexity of our candidates, we must be careful not to upset the delicate balance of factors on which the population depends for its emotional release in the politico-patriotic area of our national life." And Poole spat: "Sign it 'Cordially.'"

Turning aside, Elwood walked to a camp stool which a clerk had just vacated. He sat down and

began to rehearse his debate material in a loud voice. A few minutes later he walked to the tent entrance and looked at the mammoth balloon-statue of Jay Milton Mossman floating above the Sociocratic tents. His sacs welled over with glycerine again. Still sucking pineapple drops, Dr. Radameyer guided him solicitously back to the camp stool, where the rehearsal continued through the remainder of the afternoon.

WHEN the program began at eight in the evening five thousand pitch-pine torches had been lit, and the bluffs above the Mississippi flickered with tufts of orange fire that cast immense shadows inside the Populist tent. The tent was empty except for Buster Poole, Dr. Radameyer and Elwood. In the litter of papers and cigars and cashier's check stubs made out in advance to the paid rallyers, the three sat silently while twenty-five thousand throats made a thunderous roar. Lady Olivia was performing a sensational trick on the taut wire.

No word had been received from the Sociocratic tents about the bell-ringers. They were the next turn on the program, the fifth before the debate was scheduled to begin. Buster Poole's bald head was adrip with orange sweat. He held his ear cocked,

one eye closed. But it was difficult, if not impossible, for him to hear the tiny shouts of six turbo-bus-loads of his rallyers among the thousands of voices that cheered when Lady Olivia unzipped part of her costume and dropped it down into the crowd—a fancy pink bustle embroidered *Mossman*.

Suddenly the tent flap lifted.

Three men walked in. One, rolling ponderously, was Andy Hawk, a sow-bellied five-foot fighter from the southern coal regions. Hawk walked straight up to Buster Poole, all confidence and stinking sweat.

Elwood rose from his campstool. Back in the shadows the other two visitors waited. Elwood made out the handsome young face of Jay Milton Mossman, deeply tanned above his crisply-white but inexpensive tunic.

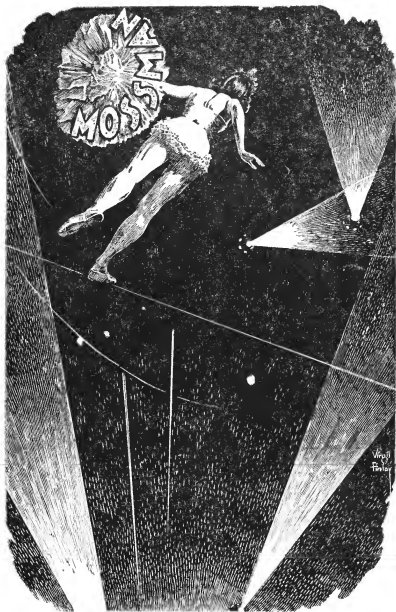
The third figure was so deeply in shadows that even the reflected firelight from the rally grounds did not reveal him. Buster Poole backed off a step. He wiped fog from his glasses, staring down at the quivering, smiling little fat man.

"Well, Hawk?"

"I got your memo."

"About time you answered."

"We'll strike the bell-ringers. That is, unless your candidate wishes to withdraw for an uncontested election."



"Are you out of your damned mind?" Buster screamed.

"Sir—!" Elwood brandished his cane, the head winking and flashing with bright lights in the shifting red shadows. "As a patriotic Custodian who has served the sovereign state of Illinois with dignity and faithfulness and courage, I *protest* your—"

"Can't you shut him off?" Hawk asked.

Buster snapped his fingers. Dr. Radameyer said, "Drink Pop-A-Cola."

Elwood's mouth fell open, his enunciation complex electronically frozen. But he retained the capacity to move, and the stimulus-code did not affect his tear sacs, which began to well with glycerine. It ran in two greasy trickles down his cheeks.

Buster Poole's voice had acquired the dangerous, raspish quality of the growl of the tiger jabbed once too often by the trainer's stick: "Speak your piece, Hawk. You know I won't pull Elwood."

"Oh?" Hawk's cheerful face beamed malice and triumph. "You mentioned in your memo, I think, that all non-humans, because of their complexity, inevitably wind up with some disordered relays or what-ever-you-call-them. That, Buster my friend, is due to the fact that they've been made, by law, to re-

semble humans. But I can guarantee you that our boy doesn't have such a weak point." Hawk lumbered around. "Do you, Jay?"

The face of Jay Milton Mossman broke wide in a white grin that shone like ivory in the dark. His electronic voice said warmly, "No, Andy, that's right, I do not."

"You know as well as I, you conniving braggard, that anything but a human-model non-human is illegal," Buster snarled.

"Don't call me names," said Hawk, lightly but dangerously. "Although I guess I can't blame you, seeing as how you've already lost November. For your information, Buster, the law here in Illinois was changed three weeks ago. The new executive decree will be made public at a press conference. Tomorrow. You don't have any legal recourse, either. We may have made Jay contrary to what the law allowed—but he didn't start showing any of his little refinements publicly until *after* the new decree went into effect."

"Changed the law?" gasped Dr. Radameyer, surprised for perhaps the first time in his life. "Changed? Who changed it."

The third figure, tall, impeccably dressed, stirred out of the shadows.

"I did."

Buster Poole's face collapsed into disbelief and rage. "Wing!"

"It was my pleasure to sign the executive order, with the governor's approval," said John Wing, who was Illinois State Commissioner of Robots. "Illinois has always led the fight for progressive technology. Soon the other states will follow the precedent, I'm sure. The population is quite ready, psychologically, to accept a non-human who neither sleeps, ingests or eliminates." A small, malicious smile curved the tansured face. "And you might also be interested in knowing, Poole, that at noon tomorrow, following the press conference, I shall endorse the Custodial candidacy of Jay Milton Mossman."

"That is right," said Jay Milton Mossman with another jerk of the metallic musculature that pulled his artificial epidermis into a smile. "That's correct, he will."

THROUGH it all the roar of voices from the rally-grounds had been growing to a thunder as Lady Olivia completed her act. Now searchlights wig-wagged back and forth wildly along the taut wire. Lady Olivia took her bows. Then a raucous voice on the public address system tried to announce the next act. Elwood stood balancing his weight from one artificial foot to another, hearing everything that was said but unable to speak out. His tear-sacs had overflowed,

coating his face with a grease of glycerine. Their tiny orifices still pumped, but no more fluid came.

Buster Poole looked at Radameyer. "We'll build another Elwood."

"That," said Radameyer, around a pineapple drop, "will take time."

"And the model you've got," said Hawk, "has to sleep seven hours every night. I was looking at the circuitry depositions in the state vaults, just to check."

"Those vaults are *secret*!" Buster howled at Wing. "You cheap crook, I thought you weren't for sale."

Wing paused in the act of lighting a cigar. His eyes resembled hard bits of Illinois coal. "Why, Mr. Poole, you never tried to buy."

"Elwood can't possibly keep up with the kind of campaign Jay here will wage," Hawk said. "That's why I thought I'd at least give you the opportunity to withdraw your candidate tonight."

Poole seized Radameyer's shoulder. "Can we re-program him non-human?"

"Impossible. We'd have to begin all over again. The principles are different."

"I realize this puts you in a bad position, Buster," Hawk said, suddenly solicitous. "Elwood will lose, of course, because he can't keep up. Can't

possibly duplicate Jay's coverage of the state. Besides, people are growing tired of silver-headed canes and silver hair and golden voices. They want a machine that *acts* like a machine—. One of these days people may decide the whole business of a Custodian in Washington is stupid—which it is. But until they decide that way, and as long as we keep having elections, I want my party to win. This time, it will."

"That's true," said Jay Milton Mossman. "I believe it will."

"—and now ladies and gentlemen," a hoarse amplified voice thundered through the flame-shadowed tent, *"the next stellar act on this stellar bill, all brought to you through the courtesy of your Sociocratic candidate for Custodian, Jay Milton Mossman—a group of stellar artists—"*

"The bell-ringers," said Radameyer, in a warning whisper.

Hawk moved toward a field phone on one of the deal tables. "I'll strike them."

Buster Poole looked at Elwood Everett Swigg with hatred and loathing.

"Forget it," he said. "Quick brown fox."

"My hands may not be clean," said Wing, "but I will be very glad to see a man like you lose this election."

"Shut up," said Buster Poole.

"Radameyer, we'll rebuild in time to beat—"

"Oh, we can't," Radameyer said listlessly.

"Don't say *can't*," Buster screamed. "Damn you, don't!"

Over the amplification system the Coal Valley Family began to ring their bells.

Elwood Everett Swigg raised one arm. He brandished his cane. His eyes were full of flame and shadow, and his hair gleamed.

"When in the course of human events," he said, his voice booming out above Buster Poole's hysterical pleas to Radameyer, "a government of the people by the people for the people provides for the common defense and—"

Walking out of the tent, Elwood Everett Swigg turned into the darkness. He walked proudly, his head high, his shoulders back. He walked decisively, with no waver in his step. He walked away from the crowds and the torches straight toward the lip of the bluff.

"I pledge allegiance to the flag," he said to the night wind, flinging wide his arms, "and to the demonstration of my vital position as Custodian, friends and neighbors, which I shall now proceed to render unto—"

He walked into air over the bright ribbon of the Mississippi under the moon. He sang *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* all the way down.

THE END



THE SPECTROSCOPE

By S. E. COTTS

I HAVE often pointed out in these columns that there are more kinds of anthologies than you can shake a stick at. This occurs partly, of course, because there are so many stories that fall under the general heading of science fiction. But it also exists because a wealth of stories is an almost irresistible temptation to a wealth of people with a mania for classifying them. There are anthologies of one particular author's output, or from one particular magazine, or on one particular subject, or covering one particular chunk of time, or a selection of the year's best, or the year's worst, or the year's zaniest, etc. I haven't yet made up my mind whether this embarrassment of riches is a sign that sf is starting to suffer from 'tired blood' and so has to keep repeating itself, or whether it has reached such a plateau of maturity that it is right and proper to be setting forth past accomplishments. Whatever the reason,

this month we have two more.

The Fifth Annual of the Year's Best S-F. Edited by Judith Merril. 320 pp. Simon and Schuster. \$3.95.

Judy Merril's annual labor of love has just been published and, as far as the stories are concerned, it is the best yet. Readers owe her a debt of gratitude for this yearly service since the amount of material she has to wade through to come up with these stories is mountainous. But as long as she is willing to do the work, all of us lazy readers will continue to sit back and enjoy the excellent product of her effort.

There is a tremendous range in these stories by a great variety of authors—from Bradbury and the other old hands to a whole batch of newcomers. And it seems to me that the real excitement and vitality in this volume stems more from the new names rather than the old pros.

For there is nothing to compare with the thrill of reading a new author in a strange style and realizing that it is really great. By contrast, the Bradbury story makes a try at being an evocative vignette but the effort shows through, and the Sturgeon story is a little bit too 'far out.' The exception to this is Simak's "A Death in the House," a rich, warmly compassionate story of the type I praised so highly in his last book, reviewed recently.

The most impressive of the debuts (or near-debuts) are "Flowers for Algernon" by Daniel Keyes (which previously graced another anthology), "Day at the Beach" by Carol Emshwiller, and "The Sound Sweep" by an English author, J. G. Ballard. Though the characters of these three have practically nothing in common (in the first a human guinea pig, in the second victims of a holocaust and their mutant son, in the third an opera singer and a mute), the same mood pervades each story. They have a haunting poignance, a sense of yearning and searching, not for the moon and stars, but for something had briefly, cherished, and then lost.

Now, however, for the debit side. Although in her comments in the back, Miss Merrill tells us she has dropped the controversial non-fiction section, this is very misleading. For there is

still non-fiction in her book, but just not relegated to a special section of its own. Of the twenty-two selections six of them are definitely not stories. And since the book title indicates the contents as science fiction, science fiction it ought to be. Besides, if *Amazing's* letter column is any guide, most fans prefer it that way. Of the six pieces, two are poems one of which is completely sick and psycho. Of the remainder, one is a reprint from *The New York Times* which ought not to be included where the sources are primarily magazines. And my pet peeve is the inclusion of an editorial from John Campbell's magazine. At the risk of being accused of partisanship, I must say that no editorial of any magazine belongs in a book of the type Miss Merrill has evolved over the years. And under the heading of things that don't belong, I also place Miss Merrill's constant sniping remarks about Kingsley Amis, writer and critic. I have no more love for or patience with many of his views than Miss Merrill. But by her backbiting she descends to the level of the one whom she criticizes, and what is worse, lowers the quality of the volume. For what begins as a beautifully laid out book with mature and thoughtful selections takes on the tone of a high school yearbook or the

letter column of a magazine. Of course it is Miss Merrill's book and she is free to do with it as she will, but it is a shame to see a perfectly good book indulge in this kind of juvenilia. Criticism has its place, but that is not the vehicle for it.

A Decade of Fantasy and Science Fiction. *Selected by Robert P. Mills.* 406 pp. Doubleday & Company, Inc. \$4.50.

This is a collection of finely written tales published in honor of the tenth year of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. None of the stories were included in any of the previous nine annuals. This ought to be a notable occasion, yet it turns out to be a disturbing one. In the first place, a good half dozen of the stories are fairy tales or folk tales or involve the use of magic for their telling. There will be no long discussion here of whether fairy tales, etc. can be classed as science fiction and/or fantasy since that would take up the whole column. My disagreement is that the inclusion of such a large number doesn't give a true picture of what the field is more often concerned with, or what *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* usually publishes. The same objection could be made about the choice of authors. I'm sure it looks very impressive to see an sf anthology

feature work by Ogden Nash, John Masefield, Howard Fast, Graham Greene, Oliver La Farge and Horace Walpole, in fact one quarter of the entries are by some of the world's greatest writers. The non-initiate would almost believe that this magazine published such writers every month. But even if this were true (and it isn't), these very important writers are not primarily (or even secondarily) science fiction writers and are not important in the history and development either of science fiction as a field, or *F&SF* as a magazine. In several of these 'famous' inclusions, in fact, it is obvious that they are minor efforts and therefore they are suspect on the grounds that either they crowded out some more deserving and less aristocratic authors, or that the magazine has not published enough great regular stories to fill the yearly annual plus this mammoth volume.

But the most incredible distortion of all is to give the impression that these 'famous' pieces were written originally for *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. The editor doesn't say so, but this is obviously what he wants some gullible folks to believe (otherwise, why an anthology at all?). But if you scan some of the copyright dates you'll see this was a physical

impossibility. *F&SF* reprinted them from other sources first in their magazines and now in this anthology. Considering that most magazines subsist solely on work written specifically for them, the inclusion of these pieces makes *F&SF* look worse not better.

As for old favorites, there is a less than great Zenna Henderson, and outstanding stories by Theodore Sturgeon, Avram Davidson and Ward Moore. Yet these cannot wholly take away my displeasure. Or perhaps I am expecting too much. At ten years of age, maybe the magazine is still too young to comprehend that trying to appear bigger than you are makes you come out smaller in the end.

Drunkard's Walk. By Frederik Pohl. 142 pp. Ballantine Books. Paper: 35¢.

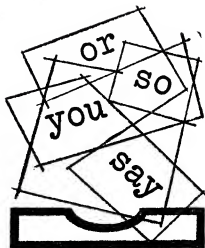
Frederik Pohl's latest opus (a shortened version of which appeared in *Galaxy*) is a beautiful example of the dangers inherent in type-casting an author. Mr. Pohl is known for his satires on our cockeyed modern world, the most famous probably being *The Space Merchants* with C. M. Kornbluth. Knowing this, and seeing the cover caption describing the book as biting, funny and sharply satirical, one might reasonably expect to find

just that. Such is not the case however.

Drunkard's Walk is a term used to describe the Brownian Movement, the actual motion of molecules as one bumps into another and that one bumps into a third, etc. Mr. Pohl uses this concept in many ingenious ways in his novel. It pops up straight in scientific discussions between some of the characters; it describes the cure which is adopted as a protection against enemy control; it is also used symbolically in the haunted dreams of the main character, Cornut, who is a Math teacher at a university in 2166. He is a very successful young man, yet he has tried to commit suicide nine times in seven weeks.

The book opens like a straight suspense story. But gradually other dimensions become apparent. Why can't he succeed in killing himself? Why have other faculty tried to do the same thing? For what does the enemy want to be rid of him?

Without interrupting the forward motion of the narrative, Pohl gives us glimpses of the mores of the time, but as straight description, rather than as his usual attempt at satire or ridicule. The story's the thing here, regardless of the fact that Pohl's previous work and his publisher would lead us to think otherwise.



Dear Editor:

I've heard a lot of promises about nixing the serials but now that's all we've got. That's too bad, because this is the last issue of *Amazing* I'm going to buy for a long time. Maybe I'll look in annually to see if you've changed back to complete stories. Why should we have to wait three-four months on a novel? Most of us forget the story by that time. Of course we could save up the issues until we got the complete story, but why the heck should we?

Virgil Ames

Johnstown, New York

● *We'll miss you, but you'll miss us more when you see what's coming up. Most readers like serials.*

● *The recent blast at women SF writers has stirred up a hornet's nest. Herewith, some of the hornets:*

Dear Editor:

This is the first time in many years I have become incensed by the 'male superiority' note to be found in the writings of men with strong inferiority complexes. Mr. Clemente's letter in your December issue fails to reckon with the fact that a good deal of life centers around home, children, dogs and the rest of the mundane items he attributes to 'soap opera'.

In my opinion, anyone who can build a plausible story around such themes for the enjoyment of a large percentage of readers is entitled to do so, male or female.

As to female authors of high caliber, has Mr. Clemente ever read one of Zenna Henderson's 'children' stories? If not, I feel sorry for the pleasures he has missed.

Mr. Clemente impresses me as entirely the same type of person. Miss Wilhelm showed Robbie's father to be in her outstanding story.

By the way, does he know how many men read the *Ladies Home Journal*?

(Mrs.) Liby Vintus
1424 West 185th St.
Gardena, California

AMAZING STORIES

Dear Editor:

I have been a science fiction fan for approximately 10 years. That is to say almost one-half my life. I wish to point out that the following blast has nothing whatever to do with any type of hostility towards men.

I think Mr. Carl Clemente has an illness of the highest degree called male conceit and out of proportion male egotism. How can he possibly be so victorian as to howl when a woman is trying? I have read far worse stories just as I have read far better. Mr. Clemente is, by his own statement an author of sorts. Now, I have read extensively in and out of the field of science fiction and don't believe I have ever read anything with that name listed as author. Or if I have then apparently I wasn't sufficiently impressed to note the name.

Mr. Clemente reminds me of the pig-headed college senior who smugly informs one that higher education entitles one to become a snob and be a judge of "the common people." I have one comment!—Phooey!!! If Mr. C. wants stories written exclusively for the bolstering of the male ego, I suggest he read technical and sport books only.

Pamela H. Gross
2020 Albemarle St.
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Dear Editor:

Obviously editors are human, else they would not be able to publish and edit prozines these days. Of course, this does not mean that authors, agents, artists, etc. fit into the same category. Some of the stories I've read recently read as if they were turned out by some sort of mechanical computer whose only function is to flood the field with stories. There's also every indication that many writers are contortionists. Prolific ones like Bob Silverberg and Poul Anderson who must apparently type with their toes, as well as their fingers, in maintaining the vast output that they do.

In the light of this, Carl A. Clemente's charges about women being unable to write plausible science fiction is completely ridiculous. Some of the finest writers in the field are females: C. L. Moore, Judith Merril, Margaret St. Clair, etc. etc. In non-science fiction literature you find even more outstanding female authors. The uncalled for generalizations Mr. Clemente makes can easily be dismissed by anyone with enough intelligence to see that you can't lump all the female authors into one category and say they all do this or that.

Mike Deckinger
85 Locust Ave.
Mielburn, N. J.



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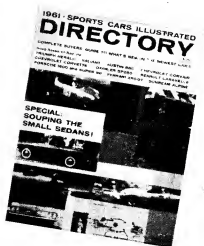
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